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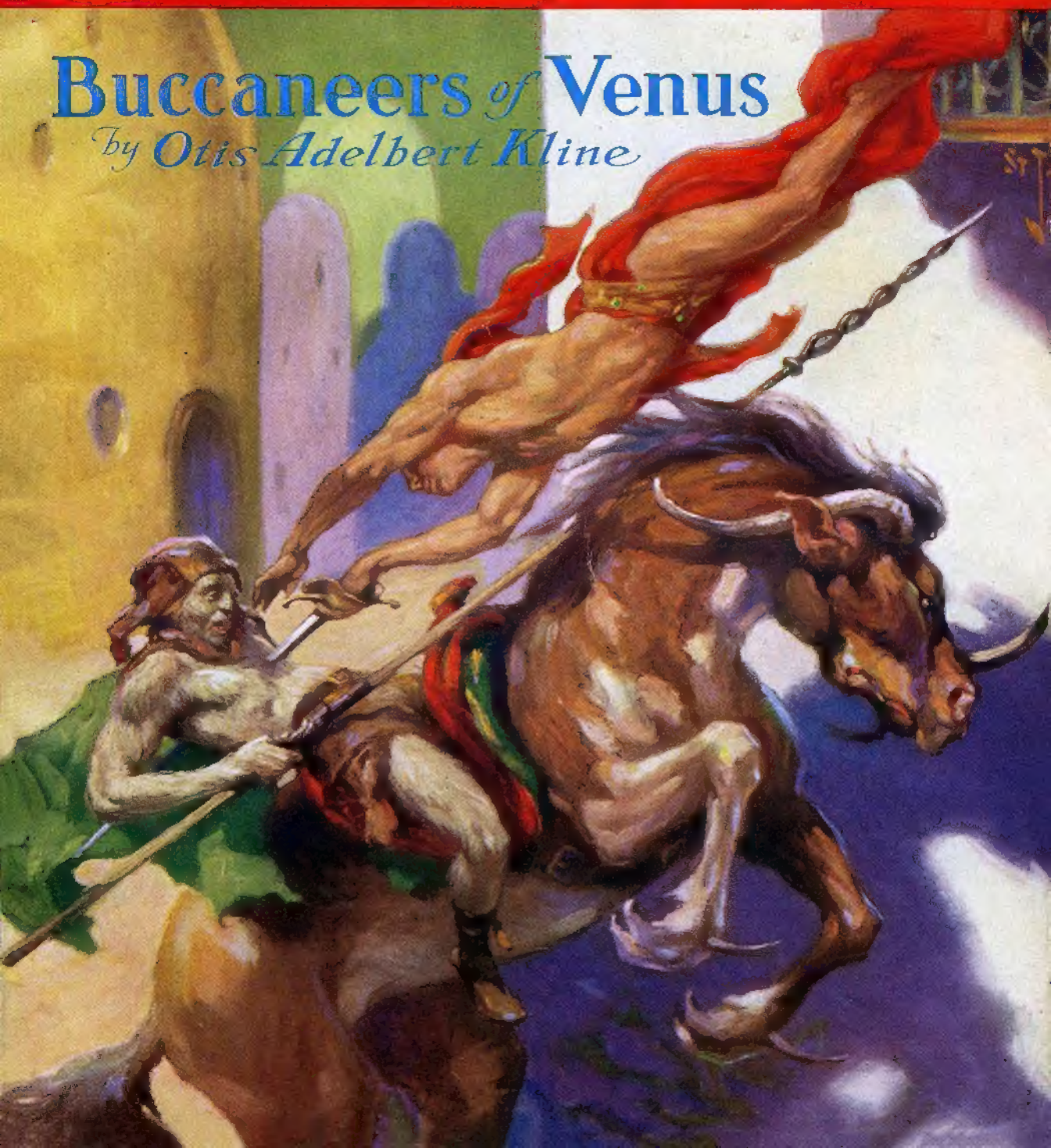
Weird Tales

JAN. 25¢

Buccaneers of Venus

by Otis Adelbert Kline



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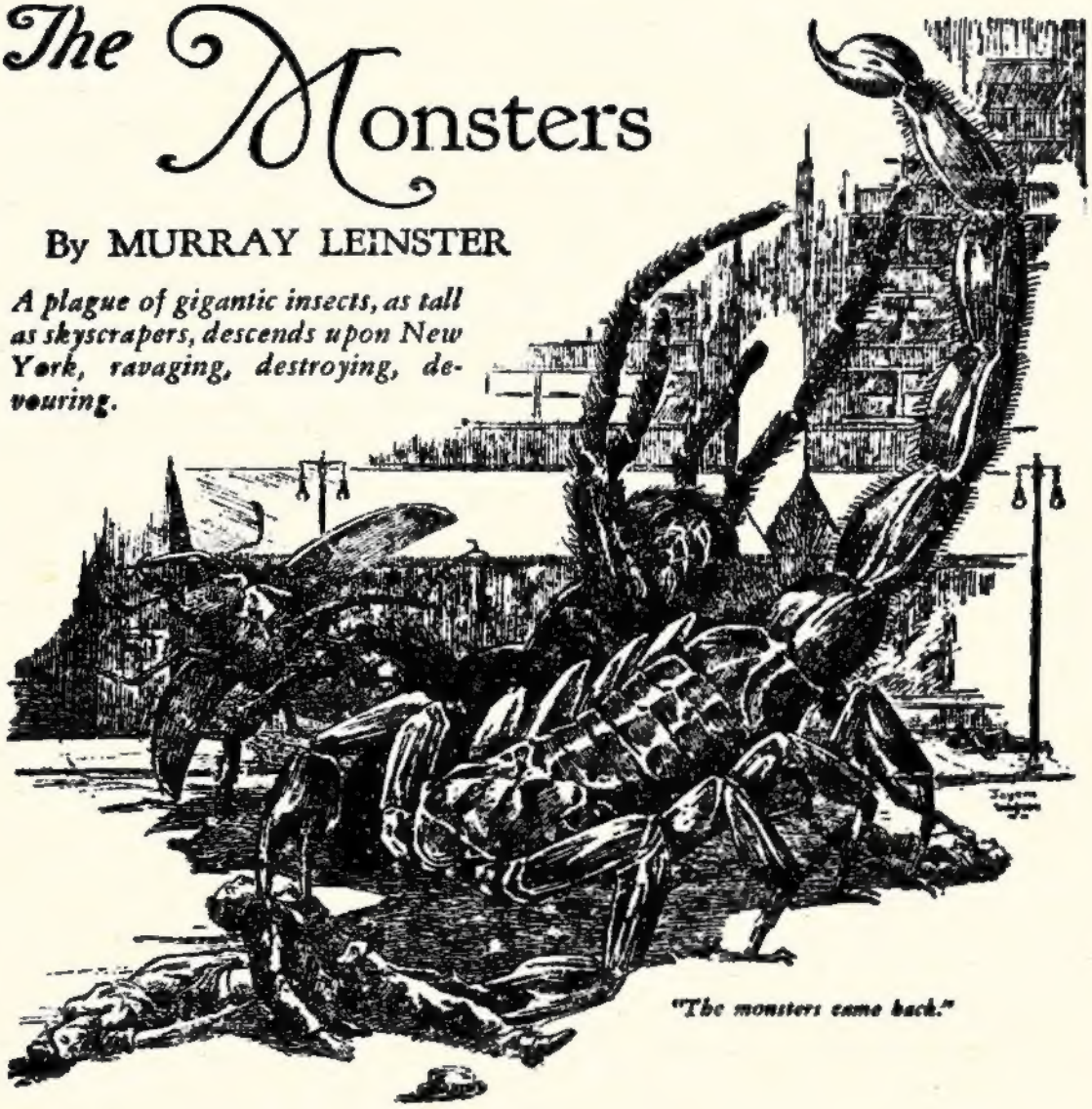
The Monsters

By MURRAY LEINSTER

A plague of gigantic insects, as tall as skyscrapers, descends upon New York, ravaging, destroying, devouring.



"The monsters came back."

DANNY BURTON very justly has the credit of having ended the menace of the Monsters, but according to the records it was one Patrolman Schwartz, Shield 5023, who actually saw them first. On the log at his precinct station it is down in black and white: *"10:16. Emergency call from Patrolman Schwartz, Shield 5023, reporting giant spider in middle of 46th Street. Ambulance sent for him, with relief."*

It is fairly clear that Patrolman Schwartz was assumed to be suffering from prohibition horrors, and that trouble was in store for him.

However, the record goes on: *"10:20. Emergency call. Motorcycle Officer Casey. Giant centipede, forty feet long, outside 819 W. 53rd Street . . ."* That entry was never finished, because of: *"10:21. Riot call from Times Square. Giant insects attacking crowds . . ."* And that was broken into by: *"10:22. Ambulance and reserve call. Hoxy's Theater. Panic. Giant spider . . ."* And from there the log of that one particular

precinct trails off into incoherence. The next four or five lines, as well as they can be translated from the increasingly agitated illegibility of the desk-man, read as follows: *"10:24. Subway station 48th Street blocked . . . giant worm . . . moth fifth avenue sixty feet l—— Bees big as cows traffic blocked fifty-seventh carried off man big beetle holy mother reserves riot guns caterpillar . . ."*

There is no use following that record further. It contains no really intelligible statement for the better part of three-quarters of an hour. Then it begins, raggedly, to record the reports of police on riot duty regarding ambulances routed to divers hospitals with the number of people packed in each one, of emergency hospitals hastily improvised in smashed-open stores, and such data as must be made available to a central organizing office even while a calamity is going on. And the Monsters, even on their first appearance, did constitute a calamity. The toll of dead and injured for that first night made Danny Burton feel rather sick when he saw it in his own newspaper, and as a reporter on the *Tabloid* Danny was inured to the dishing-up of the gruesome and the lurid for the *Tabloid's* particular lip-reading public.

It may be that Danny's reaction to that casualty list was the most significanc thing about the first appearance of the Monsters, though he was assuredly the last person on earth to seem of any importance in connection with them. Danny was twenty-five, he earned thirty dollars a week on the *Tabloid*, and his occupation was the uncovering of such facts as would justify the production of composite photographs to go under headlines like, "LOVE NEST RAID BARES TRAGEDY," and "RUM KING BEGS MERCY OF ENEMIES." He shared an apartment with Tommy Burns, who worked in a bank and dreamed dreams of television apparatus, and with Dick Thomas, who kept the bathroom in a mess with his photographic chemicals. Danny, himself, cherished an ambition to write plays. The three of them were as unpromising a group of youngsters as ever failed to set the world on fire. But it happened that through Danny Burton the trio had their pictures in the papers for three days running. And, more important, the menace of the Monsters was removed.

In justice, though, we should give due credit to Patrolman Schwartz, Shield 5023. He saw them first.

OFFICER SCHWARTZ'S footsteps echoed hollowly as he strolled with ponderous tread along the nearly empty street. It was a little after ten. Behind him, the traffic on Fifth Avenue had dwindled to a spaced, separate flow of purring bodies which could even be picked out as individuals as they flashed across the street intersection. Ahead of him, an elevated train growled swiftly past, above Sixth Avenue. On either side were tall, silent buildings showing here and there a single illuminated window two or three stories up, and showing now and again a quiet, discreetly lit ground-floor space which was either a nondescript coffee-house or a tea-room specializing in privacy. A taxicab had stopped before one of these last. A girl stood abstractedly by while her escort settled with the chauffeur. A surface car rumbled flimsily up Sixth Avenue. Patrolman Schwartz paused and regarded a shop window displaying a delicately folded outfit of lingerie.

One of the irregularly spaced lighted windows above him turned dark. The light inside had been snapped out. The man and girl by the taxi moved across the sidewalk and entered the tea-room. It was also—as Patrolman Schwartz knew

with a vast calmness—a speakeasy. There was a dull, muted roar everywhere in the air. It was the voice of New York at night. The stars were dimmed by the competing glare of the city's myriad lights. Far away, over on Broadway, the corner of an electric sign winked elaborately in a wriggling pattern of colored sparks. A taxi-horn blew raucously. The air had the smell of dust and exhaust fumes and asphalt, with a bare trace of an acrid odor which was probably needle-beer somewhere near by, and altogether it was a peaceful and normal evening on Patrolman Schwartz's beat.

Then it happened.

There was a shadow overhead. Something soared in a steep arc through the air, descending. A vast bulk alighted with an utter soundlessness upon the exact middle of the pavement. There was an involved, intricate pattern of interweaving angular objects, all of it utterly without sound. Patrolman Schwartz stopped in his tracks. The street noises and the city roar were to him sheer quietness, and that quietness was utterly undisturbed. He stared blankly at the twisting, writhing pattern of tangled things. On account of their size, those things looked to Patrolman Schwartz like small steel girders—say, five or six inches in thickness. But no mass of steel would writhe and twist with such monstrous swiftness, and especially no thing of steel could move without sound. This thing was alive! But the whole affair was so completely impossible that for a moment Patrolman Schwartz was not even frightened. He was only amazed.

Then somebody screamed. Man or woman, Patrolman Schwartz never knew, but that shriek of unbelieving horror broke the paralysis that bound him. Patrolman Schwartz moved. More, he moved nearer to the writhing mass in the street. Instinctively, he clutched his night-stick. He had gone ten paces before his eyes told him what it was he saw. He had gone twenty before his brain would credit it. He turned on his flashlight and shot its beam upon the still moving, still soundless mass. And then Patrolman Schwartz's breath left him in a choking gasp and he knew stark panic.

The weaving steel girders were legs, monstrously horned and spiked. A rounded bulk amongst them was a belly. And the legs were easily fifteen feet in length, and there were eight of them, and the belly was not less than six feet in diameter, and before the belly there was a face—Patrolman Schwartz had no impression of a head or neck, but only of a face—which was so monstrously inhuman and so inhumanly monstrous that he felt his throat working to utter a scream echoing the one he had heard a little while since. The Thing was a spider! A spider that filled the middle of the road!

There were eyes which glowed an insane ferocity. There was a slavering opening which was a mouth, and beside it ghastly feelers, clawed and jointed. And the Thing was busy with another smaller Thing beneath it, which it was killing horribly. While the policeman stood frozen, the smaller Thing ceased to kick and the Monster remained squatting upon the asphalt of Forty-sixth Street, in New York, and began to eat its prey. And there was no sound whatever. Not even the champing of jaws or ripping noises as the smaller creature was crunched and crushed and devoured.

Patrolman Schwartz had watched, paralyzed, while a giant spider bigger than a draft-horse slaughtered a smaller living thing of which he could only be sure that it was not human. But then, quite suddenly, the shaking man swore deeply. Tremblingly. Then he put his whistle to

his lips and blew shrilly. He was trembling, but he got out his revolver while he blew, and he pounded on the sidewalk with his night-stick.

Heads appeared. Somebody in evening clothes appeared around a corner.

"Get back!" roared Patrolman Schwartz. "Get back!"

There came a sputtering of motors as he blew his whistle again. A motorcycle cop. Then another patrolman, running. A murmuring noise began strangely on the seemingly deserted street. There were short, sharp little strangled cries. People saw the Thing in the middle of the pavement. They could not see it—mercifully — as clearly as Patrolman Schwartz could see it, but they felt horror. Windows crashed shut. Two more cops. Three. They goggled unbelievingly at the shape they could not see clearly, when Patrolman Schwartz told them what it was.

He led the way to show them, and afterward his flesh crawled at the memory of his own daring. He went within ten yards of the feasting Thing. It lifted its Face. . . . The cops drew back, shivering.

"There's nothin' to do," said Patrolman Schwartz unsteadily, "but call Headquarters for a machine-gun. An' keep people away from this dam' thing. . . ."

The policemen shakily took up posts to close the street. Police whistles bring crowds quickly, in New York. Already there were people coming. A woman was screaming monotonously in some room above. . . .

Patrolman Schwartz made his report and was instantly convicted of having the horrors. He returned to his post and stood guard. Nothing happened. The Thing ate horribly but without a sound. If its belly had not been six feet through, if its legs would not span a circle thirty feet across, it would have been a spider. A spider! And it paid no attention whatever to its surroundings. It feasted, terribly, upon that smaller Thing it had slaughtered. . . .

There was a stout, white-faced policeman with his revolver in his hand, watching it. There were other policemen warning crowds away from it, keeping the street clear with profanity and nightsticks—and with cold sweat on their foreheads. The giant spider ignored them all. It was feeding. And Patrolman Schwartz watched it.

He has nothing more to do with the story of the Monsters. He simply saw them first.

THE second man was Motorcycle Officer Casey. He turned into Fifty-third Street at top speed, leaning well inward. There were people coming out of that street "like"—as he explained lucidly afterward—"bats out of hell with the lid off." There was pandemonium there. Somewhere there were two houses full of people all screaming at once, and the sidewalks were streaming fleeing people, old and young, who even violated that most fundamental of all New Yorker instincts and left the sidewalks to run away in the middle of the street.

Motorcycle Officer Casey swerved violently to avoid running squarely into a hugely fat man who fled silently with fixed, glassy eyes. Figures were running toward him in the strangest, most awful panic he had ever seen. They fled like folk who have gazed into the deepest pit of hell. And save for those who still screamed monotonously, these fugitives from a yet unguessed-at terror ran in an utter panic-stricken silence.

The mob in flight thinned suddenly. Casey emerged into clear space, looking for the cause of the trouble. But he

looked through emptiness for half a block and saw the backs of another thinning mob, fleeing in exactly the same fashion but in the opposite direction. There was one human figure on the sidewalk, either crushed or fallen in the terror-ridden flight, just before the houses from which the pandemonium of a madhouse came. But Casey knew something of panics, and those screams were hysteria. They were unvarying, rhythmic—definitely not the screams of people who watch a crime in process of commission.

Casey could never tell what made him look up. It was probably a movement. But he did look up, and saw Something coming smoothly and with a queer rippling motion down the side of the house. It was all of forty feet long. Its body was not less than three feet in diameter. It was a centipede—but it was forty feet long! It was colossal. It was monstrous. And it came smoothly and with a sinuous, rippling motion down the six-story building front. The human figure lay on the sidewalk before that building.

Motorcycle Officer Casey's breath whistled between his teeth. He knew terror. Stark panic. He knew pure and unadulterated horror. When he tumbled off his motor-bike, raised that limp figure from the sidewalk, and leaped back to give the bike the gas, he was hardly conscious of the movements of his own body. He was possessed of a superstitious, unreasoning terror of the monster Thing that was only sixty feet away—forty feet away . . . twenty feet. . . . Then the motor-bike shot off like a thing possessed.

The monster centipede reached the ground, arched its body and flowed across the street—which it filled from building-wall to building-wall—and then rippled obscenely up the wall of that other building. . . .

And then Times Square. The middle of the theater-time. Nobody can do more than guess what the death-toll would have been if the Monsters had first appeared an hour later, when the streets would have been thronged from curb to curb with crowds from the ended shows. It was bad enough anyway, though there was only a trickle of people on the sidewalks, movie-shopping, and sedentary groups outside a few of the theaters, smoking between the second and third acts. Even the vehicular traffic was light—for Times Square.

The electric signs blazed and twinkled and made those angular, jerky movements designed to invest *"Borhams, For the Gums"* and *"Ponds Clothes"* and *"Wellmax Coffee"* with the special form of sex-appeal which leads to a large and popular sale. The ground quivered now and again with the roaring passage of subway trains beneath. Surface cars crawled along with their absurd effect of being anachronisms in a modern city. Cars of every sort, with taxis predominating, sped along the intersecting streets. . . .

And then the Monsters appeared.

Nobody saw where they came from. Something vast and winged soared clumsily into view to southward, dodged the jagged spires of skyscrapers, and then spread huge wings stiffly and alighted soundlessly in that triangular concrete park which is between Broadway and Seventh Avenue just north of their intersection. There it folded its wings and was still for an instant. It was fifty feet long, and jet-black, and—it was an insect! It looked up ten feet or more from the pavement. It had colossal faceted eyes a yard or more across, which seemed to glitter in the lights about it. It had curving, tapered antennæ which quivered and moved about curiously and were nearly as long as the rest of its body.

The street noises of Times Square changed abruptly. The traffic tumult changed. Brakes squealed swiftly. A cop's police-whistle blew. There was an indecisive, milling confusion among the folk on foot. Then another Monster appeared.

This one came out of nowhere, slithering agilely down the windowed sides of the old Times Building. It was a great bulk fifteen feet in diameter with legs of an incredible vastness. It was a spider . . . And then something huge tumbled clumsily over the roof of Loewe's Theater and spread colossal wings to break its fall, and bounced hugely from the sidewalk. . . . It was a beetle, green in color, but obscenely fat. It writhed and wriggled crazily, getting itself upright again, while motorcars stopped with smoking tires to keep from running into it—because its bulk was that of a moving-van. It heaved itself erect and began to walk down the middle of Seventh Avenue in an extraordinary, machine-like preoccupation, its antennæ moving weirdly, its ghastly mandibles outstretched before it.

Then the panic really began. The motored traffic fled. The humans ran screaming. A policeman began to shoot, his revolver booming thinly through the uproar of yells and shrieks from human beings in the uttermost of terror. But a few—a very few—people looked upward at the beat of mighty wings, and saw a butterfly vaster than any man-created aircraft, soaring past in the glow of the lights below. And some people saw a creature scuttling across the roofs with an unholy celerity and told tales of its awesome aspect afterward. But just then there was only panic.

There was only one man in Times Square who kept his presence of mind for even a few seconds. He was a news photographer for the *New York Tabloid*. He had a news-camera up in an office of the Longacre Building. He had been preparing to photograph the after-theater crowds for the Sunday rotogravure section, using the German film which is sensitive to the light of incandescent bulbs. This man snapped pictures before he fled. He got a clear picture of the monstrous spider just as it gathered itself for a leap from the Times Building. He got a rather blurry snapshot of the beetle advancing down Seventh Avenue amid the maddened efforts of those in traffic to escape. And he had packed up his films, intending to abandon the camera for haste in flight, when he saw the beginning of the battle between the giant spider and the black creature in the concrete park. He paused for one more snap. That picture is almost clear. It shows, besides the titanic struggle of the two Monsters, the first of that affray of scurrying tumble-bugs — only ten feet long or so—which came waddling out of West Forty-fifth Street.

The queer thing about the Times Square appearance of the Monsters was that apparently nobody noticed that their flight, their marching, and even the terrific battle between the giant spider and the cricket were absolutely, utterly soundless.

2

THE death-list in Times Square was long, but the appearance of a giant spider in Hoxy's Theater was a really major catastrophe. The cathedral of the talkies was full to capacity, and eighty-odd musicians were mute while Leonora Black, upon the screen, listened yieldingly to the vocal sex-appeal of a notable he-man with a dimple in his chin. A close-up of the seductive one's face, showing the dimple clearly, was on the screen at the time of the catastrophe. There was very probably an atmosphere of pure rapture in Hoxy's Theater at that moment,

with each female in the audience imagining herself the person so delectably tempted to agreeable sin.

But a movement up near the ceiling of the vast edifice brought a shrieking uproar from the top balcony. The building shook with the outcry. Then it quivered with the trampling of feet in awful, blind, unreasoning flight. And eyes in the orchestra even tore themselves away from the scene on the screen, which would presently have turned out to be quite respectable.

A spider was spinning a web up near the ceiling. There would have been nothing alarming in that, save for the fact that the spider's belly was five feet across, and that its legs were inches thick and yards long, and the web it was spinning was as large as a steel cable. But those things accounted for the panic. For an instant there was the paralysis of utter horror. And then the spider, working preoccupiedly upon its web, began to drop toward the center of the orchestra floor, clinging to the cable of web it spun behind it. . . . It dropped toward the crowd beneath. . . .

The panic which followed would have been historic had it been alone. The roll of dead and wounded, trampled on and crushed, matches the casualty list of a minor battle. But the panic in Hoxy's Theater was not alone. There was the panic in the Forty-eighth Street subway station, when a glistening yellow slug—a blind Thing—came crawling out of the uptown tunnel and squirmed up upon the passenger platform and human beings went mad with terror because the Thing was yards in diameter and blind and horrible. . . . And there was the moth that came reeling down from the sky with something smaller but still vastly terrible pursuing it, and blocked traffic on Fifth Avenue. . . . And there were the three bees—they were fifteen feet long, and their stings were like barbed harpoons—who were reported to have carried off a man in Fourth Avenue, and a caterpillar. . . .

But Danny Burton saw the caterpillar. He was writing on a play at the time, working in his shirt-sleeves in the living-room of the flat he shared with his two friends. He was struggling with the recurrent temptation that afflicted him. Danny knew, of course, that you can be artistic, or you can be popular. And to be artistic you have to imitate Eugene O'Neill or one of a select list of other playwrights. And Danny was suffering from the urge to write this particular scene—as he had been tempted to write others—in a way that was not artistic at all, but was merely true. But he fought down the temptation and plugged on, keeping his psychopathic elements clearly in view and sternly restraining his protagonist's tendency to run away from the artistic into the authentic.

Then he heard the roar outside. It was a sort of growling tumult, interspersed with thin and high-pitched noises which sounded like women screaming. He lifted his head. Then he heard a crash. It was the sort of crash that is instantly identified. The screech of tortured metal, the metallic clamor, and then the frightened screaming of somebody who has seen an automobile accident and screams instead of doing anything intelligent.

Then, of course, there should have come a frightened hush, and afterward the hum of babbling conversation. But nothing of the sort occurred. The crash and the screaming did not interrupt the growing roar of a panic-stricken crowd for even an instant.

Danny went to the window. He looked down. The street was full from gutter to gutter. People were running away from something, eddying crazily about

lamp-posts and other insurmountable obstacles in their path. From their throats there seemed to rise a sort of composite hoarse growling sound like nothing Danny had ever heard before. There were two cars in a crazy heap, one of them turned over on its side, and nobody was paying the least attention to them or to a man who crawled out of one of them and promptly lost himself in the crowd, fleeing like the rest from the same unseen thing. Then Danny saw a girl struggling in the overturned car, trying to get out. And not one soul offered the least assistance. There was, too, a tiny wisp of smoke coming from under the hood. Fire. . . .

On the instant Danny leaped for the door. He was, of course, a reporter for the *New York Tabloid*. But also he was a human being. He flung himself down the steps in headlong dives which beat any time the elevator could have made. He arrived at the bottom with an attained velocity which sent him hurtling out through the big doorway into the street.

And even in the short time he had taken to descend four flights, the crowd had thinned. Where it had filled the street from one side to the other, now there was only a trickle of running, gasping figures. Danny saw a flare-up of flame, and dismissed all other matters until he should reach the toppled motor-car. He careened off a running figure which was panting hoarsely, each breath sounding like a croak. He raced to the car. The flame was climbing higher. It roared upward, suddenly. The girl's head projected from a window, deathly white.

"My—foot's caught!" she said quickly, though she cringed from the mass of flame now leaping up from the hood of the toppled car. "If you can—lift a little. . . ."

Danny raced to the farther side. A two-passenger coupé, turned over. He heaved mightily at the top. It lifted. There was a tinkling of glass. He smelled gasoline, pouring out. The car was a small one, and had a ten-gallon tank under the hood. That had been punctured. Then a short-circuit had sparked. . . .

Heat seared him as the spreading vapor flared in a sudden momentary blast. The girl was scrambling up to the side of the car. She half jumped, half toppled into his arms.

He dragged her away as the fire under the hood roared furiously.

"Hurt much?" he demanded.

"I—don't know. . . ." The girl's fingers tightened affrightedly on his arm. She was not even looking at the burning car, though the heat of its blazing was fierce enough for discomfort. She was looking past Danny, in the direction from which the now vanished mob had fled. "L-look!"

And Danny turned and looked. And a Thing was coming vaguely down the very center of the street. It was round and huge. It was a caterpillar. But the fur which makes caterpillars seem so soft and downy to look at here showed as a forest-like growth of slender spikes; of horns each one ten feet in length. The caterpillar was yellow, and while its body might be three yards in diameter beneath its fur, those ghastly spikes reached out and filled the narrow canyon of the street to suffocating fullness. It had eyes, huge areas of an inflamed red. It had horns, which were tufts of spiky hairs. It moved with an undulating motion upon its innumerable stubby legs and now and again it lifted its forepart and seemed to gaze vaguely about. When it did so, the furry, lateral palpi before its mouth-orifice were seen to be moving indecisively. Then it settled to the ground again and moved on. Deliberate

as its progress seemed, however, its rate of travel was swift. It was at least sixty feet long. It was moving quite as fast as a man could run.

DANNY looked once, then swung the girl from her feet and raced across the street. Flight with a girl who might or might not be able to run was impossible. Danny reached the doorway and swung her inside it.

"That—that Thing," he said unsteadily, "is too big to get in here. So—that's what the crowd was running from!"

He stared at it, unable to believe his eyes. The girl stared with him, abstractedly rubbing at her ankle. Danny swallowed.

"It might—break in," he said unsteadily, "but I—think we can get away faster than it could break down walls. Don't you?"

The girl turned her face to him. Her expression was strange, as if she doubted her own sanity.

"I—I know what it is," she said, and swallowed. "I've—raised them, for fun. The little ones. They eat peach-tree leaves. . . ."

The Thing's head was opposite the doorway at that moment. It halted, and Danny thrust the girl behind him. The monstrous multiple eyes stared vaguely all about. Each eye was a myriad eyes, but they seemed sightless because they did not seem directed. The Thing flowed on. . . .

"Gosh!" said Danny dazedly. "And I'm supposed to be a reporter! Come on!"

He turned and raced for the elevator, the operator of which was down on his knees, praying frenziedly. Danny seized the controls and shot the car upward. As it rose with a dizzy speed, he demanded again:

"Hurt much?"

"I—don't think so," she told him unsteadily. Her mind, like his, was unable to fix itself on anything but the incredible reality they had seen. "How—what—how did that caterpillar *grow?* It ought to be—it ought to be an inch long! It is a giant peach-caterpillar! I'm sure! But how did it grow?"

Danny brought the elevator to a stop. It was distinctly unskilful handling. He opened the door and had to step down a foot and a half. He helped her out.

"I've got to telephone," he said feverishly. "Got to tell the *Tabloid* about it. What was the name of that thing?"

He was rushing into the still-open door of the apartment and dialing furiously, *"Tabloid?* Give me Jeans, quick! . . . This is Burton! Big story, Jeans! There's all hell loose! Panic! Mobs running around. A big caterpillar down here, as big as a dozen motor-trucks. . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake!" said a weary voice on the wire. *"They're all over town. Spiders. Bugs. Everything in creation. Hanson got some pictures. How many killed up there?"*

"Panic only," said Danny concisely. "Don't know of any deaths. This caterpillar doesn't eat people. It's a sort that lives on peach-trees. Giant form of a well-known insect. I've got an expert here who's raised them."

The voice on the wire showed signs of life as Danny grinned at the girl.

"You've got a bug expert there? Pack him in a taxi and bring him here! In a hurry! We'll have him identify the bugs——"

"It's a she," said Danny. "Hurt in a motor-car crash in the panic and can't come." He put his hand over the transmitter and said anxiously, "I say, do you know much about bugs? I just said you were an expert on them."

"I've been doing research work in entomology," the girl told him. "You

say that it's quite true that the caterpillar we saw is harmless. It eats leaves. It's a giant peach-caterpillar. It will probably smell its way to Central Park and devour the trees there. If people keep out of its way, it'll be quite harmless."

Danny relayed the information. The man at the other end came fully to life and swore bitterly because the bug expert was injured.

"I'm sending prints of the pictures we've got," he snapped. "Have her identify them. Get her on the wire. Quick!"

The girl took the receiver. She began to ask questions. Presently she said, "That must be *Mygale Hentzii.* The American tarantula. It's a jumping spider—a hunting spider. The other's a cricket, I believe. They all seem like—gigantic forms of natural creatures. I know. . . . I wouldn't believe it, only I saw this caterpillar and recognized it. Positively. . . . Yes. . . . The *Mygale Hentzii* will jump on anything, no matter what size. I—yes—I suppose it would. . . ." She shuddered. "People will be in danger from that! . . . Centipedes? Yes. . . . Mostly they live on flies, but they'll kill anything small. . . . Yes, they'll probably attack people, too. . . ."

Danny gnawed at his lips. Suddenly he remembered and vanished into the bathroom. He came back with a roll of bandage for the girl's ankle. She was just putting down the telephone.

"What's 'taking the baby out of bed'?" she asked puzzledly. "And what's a hundred-point head?"

"Gosh!" said Danny, awed. "Pulling out the forms! At a time like this. . . . I see! You gave him stuff the other papers won't have. What the dam' things really are, and what they'll do!"

"He said something about my name in a hundred-point head. . . ."

"Then you're famous!" said Danny. "D'you see? You're a bug expert, you've told him what the bugs are, what they live on, how to dodge them, and so on. They'll splash the news all over number three page. One will be pictures. Two the horror-stuff and casualty lists. You'll get the spread on number three. How to dodge the bugs. . . ." He stopped. "My gosh!" he said unsteadily. "I still don't believe I saw it! I wonder how many there are? He said——"

"Listen!" said the girl, rather pale.

They moved to the window together. Danny opened it. There was a thin, tumultuous noise a long distance away. Human voices. Shots. Suddenly the thin rasp of machine-gun fire. The noise went on as a faint, yapping ululation. It was not alone. Somewhere else there was another tumult. The high-pitched screams of women. . . . And somewhere else still . . .

"Oh, look!" said the girl, pointing with a shaking hand.

A great winged thing fluttered above the lighted ways of the city. It was colorful and huge. Two hundred feet across or more, its wings were banded and spotted in vast areas of vivid color. Giant legs were drawn up beneath its body. Vast, gracefully arching plumed antennæ of purest gold spread out before it. And suddenly the moving beam of a searchlight seemed to streak overhead and smite the soaring thing. Its eyes glowed a vivid, dusky red. They shone like carbuncles. Like rubies.

Danny saw something vast and black and horrible leap from one building-top to another, a long distance away. But the girl's eyes were on the infinitely beautiful flying thing, soaring above a city gone mad with terror as giant insects—Monsters—made free with all its streets and ways.

"It's a Hawk-moth," said the girl

softly. "A Jessamine Sphinx. It's beautiful!"

It was beautiful. But all over the city there were outbursts of ghastly panic when some new and ever more monstrous creature appeared in a new locality. There were spiders everywhere, it seemed. Giant things which could seize upon a dray-horse as prey, and afterward crouch down leisurely beside it and extract all the juices from its carcass. There were centipedes forty feet and more in length, racing at incredible speed in quest of prey, or sometimes remaining utterly motionless as if to lure humans within reach by a semblance of immobility. And monstrous beetles lumbered here and there, and an army of tumblebugs ten feet in length scurried about in quest of food—which could only be human beings. . . .

New York was subject to an invasion never before known to man. And New York was mad with fear.

3

WHEN Dick Thomas came into the apartment, he found Danny and the girl debating anxiously, with photographic prints scattered over the table before them. Danny looked up.

"What did you see, Dick?" he demanded. "Talk for the press. Miss—Miss Adams—Miss Anne Adams. Mr. Thomas.—We're entomological headquarters for the *Tabloid*, Dick," he added. "Deciding what the bugs are, and dictating their habits and such over the phone for the edification of the populace."

"I know," said Dick grumpily. "The town's gone crazy! I saw a lot of excitement, and people throwing fits in the public streets, but I've been chasing around with a camera and that new film, and I can't see a thing to photograph but a lot of panics."

Dick Thomas had, as a matter of fact, undergone a not uncommon experience. Where the Monsters appeared, there was chaos. But the tales told by fugitives seemed so utterly incredible only around the corner from the scene of a Monster's appearance, that there were cases of perfect calmness, of complete tranquillity, in between the areas of greatest terror. More than one adventurous soul went out to get a sight of the Monsters of which even the radios were now babbling frenziedly, and wandered for hours without encountering more than the tag-end of a panic, or seeing anything more exciting than an ambulance being loaded with victims of a crash, or watching policemen subduing some unstable individual gone insane from sheer horror. Dick Thomas had searched earnestly for the source of the tumults which made the voice of the city rising toward the stars, now a frenzied ululation. And he had seen nothing whatever. He was disgusted.

"If you feel that way," said Danny, "here's comfort. Here are some prints. Still wet. Look 'em over."

The girl was regarding Dick speculatively. He picked up the slimy, glistening photographs. He looked at one and grunted. He looked at a second. The third and fourth and fifth. . . .

"Hooey!" he said. "Your filthy rag, Danny, is putting out composites! Composites! Printing photos of insects on top of photos of crowds. You didn't fall for these, did you? There are panics, yes. I've seen more cases of hysterics in the past hour than anybody outside of a madhouse ever looked at before. But these pictures—blah!"

"They're straight!" insisted Danny.

But Dick grunted and turned away. He went disgustedly into another room. He felt, at the moment, very much as a big-game hunter might feel who spent

a weary day trailing a moose, only to discover that it had walked into camp in his absence and had been shot at and missed by the cook.

Danny grinned. The phone rang. He answered and talked briefly.

"Putting your dope on the air," he announced. "Your name attached. Broadcast through the courtesy of the *Tabloid*. Nothing but spiders and centipedes are to be worried about.—Hullo!"

THE third of the triumvirate occupying the apartment came in. It was Tommy Burns, of course. His clothes were torn nearly from his body, one eye was blacked, and he had one arm in a sling made out of his handkerchief.

"You are a wreck!" said Danny. "What got after you?"

"I was in Times Square," said Tommy shakily. "Lord! Suddenly the place was full of ungodly things. Then a mob ran over me, and after that a bug that looked like a baby tank chased me. . . . I'm lucky to be alive!"

Silently, Danny extended the still-wet pictures. Tommy Burns looked down at them.

"That's it." He shuddered a little as he pointed. "I was right there. On that corner. I saw the beginning of that fight. I saw this Thing landing on the head of that one and they started fighting. Lord! . . ."

Dick Thomas came back. He was scowling.

"I was peeved," he said ungraciously. "Sorry. But those photos are composites. I'll show you. This Times Square one——"

"I was there!" interrupted Tommy, shivering. "I was right there!" Again he pointed. "Say! See that speck? That's me! Just as I started to run! That spider-thing jumped over my head! Lord! It couldn't have been fifteen feet away. And was I scared?"

"Then it wasn't a fake?" demanded Danny. "This photo's straight?"

"No fake about it! I saw it all!"

"But it is a fake!" protested Dick Thomas. "Don't you think I know a faked picture when I see one? I know how they're done! Look here! This spider is walking a good foot above the ground in this picture. In that one he's put his foot through a bench—without hurting the bench! And that big thing, the cricket, has rolled down on the iron fence. A weight like his would crush any fence flat! But see where it seems to come out of his body? It isn't even bent by his weight! Where the picture was taken of the spider and cricket, there was no fence, nor was there any bench! And when the picture was taken of the bench and fence, there was no spider or any cricket there! There were two photographs taken at different times and places, and put together! I know what I'm talking about!"

Danny bent over the picture. He saw just what Dick was pointing out. The girl leaned over his shoulder.

"Somebody," said Dick, "cut out a picture of two bugs fighting, and pasted it over a picture of a crowd in a panic, and rephotographed the combination. That's all!"

"Only," said Tommy Burns, "it doesn't happen to be true! I was there. I'm in that photo. So were the bugs there. I don't care where they seem to be walking or what they don't mash. They were there!"

Danny put his head in his hands. Rushing footsteps sounded outside the door. A *Tabloid* photographer, with more prints, his face deathly white.

"M-my Gawd!" he gasped. "I saw—what I saw on the way here! Somethin' like a mandolin on stilts, with arms like

cross-cut saws! It was lookin' in third-story windows! A big giraffe. I snapped him, but—Gawd!"

"Give me your plate!" snapped Dick Thomas. "Come along! Develop it right now! I've got the stuff all ready. . . ."

He had snatched the other man's camera and dragged him away to the bathroom, where his array of photographic apparatus silenced all the photographer's protests. Danny dialed swiftly. In seconds Anne was talking composedly into the phone.

"Yes. . . . The beetle climbing at a wall is a picture of a sisyphus beetle. A dung-beetle. Very tiny, normally, and he will be harmless. . . . That monstrous snaky-looking thing is an angle-worm, an earth-worm, one of the *Lumbricidæ*. This one looks to be a hundred feet long and ten feet thick, but it's the same creature people use for fish-bait. Harmless. The other one, that caterpillar crawling over a stalled automobile, is the caterpillar of the Tiger-moth. It's harmless too. . . ."

Tommy Burns could be heard drinking thirstily. He came back, his eyes still wide with horror. Anne hung up the receiver and turned to Danny.

"Here's something," she said queerly, "I can't make out. This picture of a Tiger-moth caterpillar with a car sticking out of its body. Nobody could fake a picture like that. It's impossible. . . ."

Danny stared at the thing. It was a picture of a caterpillar crawling diagonally across a street. It was huge; fifteen feet thick at least, and forty-five feet or more in length. And out of its body as it crawled there projected the front part of an automobile. There was no sign of a wound. There was no sign that the car was being dragged in any way. The bristles of the caterpillar's fur projected through the windshield and even through the mud-guards. But the glass, though punctured, was not crashed. The mud-guards were not bent. The car seemed incredibly to be uninjured, save that its after part was buried in the body of the caterpillar.

Dick Thomas came out, waving a wet plate. He held it silently before Anne.

"A Praying Mantis," she said, then grew pale. "It's the most terrible, most bloodthirsty insect in the world. . . ."

The photographer flung himself at the telephone. But Dick Thomas said triumphantly:

"And it's a fake too! Look! One of its legs, that top one, is sticking right into the masonry of a building-wall! The masonry isn't disturbed! The bricks aren't hurt! And either they'd have to be crashed out, or the creature's arm would be cut off!"

Dialing, the photographer said bitterly:

"Say, maybe you know somethin', but I shot that picture through the back window of a taxi while it was makin' a mile in nothin' flat! The chauffeur saw that thing too, the same time I saw it! I didn't fake that picture! Hell! I was scared down to my lights!"

Danny rocked his head back and forth in his hands. The open window admitted the sounds of a city gone mad with fear. Anne took the phone to describe the habits and prey of the Praying Mantis, after the photographer had told a lurid tale of being chased by the monster he had snapshot. He would return with the developed plate as soon as the taxi chauffeur recovered enough to recognize money when it was offered him for the trip.

"I say it's faked!"

Dick was disgustedly pugnacious, but Danny shoved the print of the caterpillar at him.

"Tell me," he said harassedly, "how that one was faked, Dick! I've had to listen to enough photography from you

to know this simply can't be done! How did they fake those bristles puncturing that windshield and the mud-guards? The actual puncturing's impossible, but so is the faking of such a picture!"

Dick stared at the picture. His face went blank. He examined it more closely and more closely still. He even got a lens and went over it with an increasing bafflement.

"I don't know," he said helplessly. "It's a fake. It's bound to be! The state of things it shows is not a possible state of things! But I don't know how it was done. From a photographic standpoint, it's perfect."

Anne spoke suddenly.

"But we—most of us anyway—have seen those monstrous creatures. They're visible. Listen, and you'll hear the screams of people who see them. I don't think the question is whether the photographs are fakes or not——"

"The question," said Danny harassedly, with his head in his hands, "is not how the photos were faked, but how photos that weren't faked could show those impossibilities! That car growing out of a caterpillar is impossible!"

"So is the caterpillar," said Anne coolly. "So are all the monsters." She pointed to a photograph. "That's a *Mygale Hentzii,* which at its biggest is an inch and a half across. This one is forty feet or more. And there are certain things about it that show it isn't a full-grown spider! Think of that! This is a cricket, which might grow to be two inches long. But this one isn't a mature specimen either, and it's fifty feet! How did these creatures come to be magnified like that?"

Danny started up.

"Magnified! Wait a minute!" He began to pace back and forth across the room. He stopped and waved his arms. "Magnified! That's the word!" he cried excitedly. "Listen! An animal's weight increases with its bulk, as the cube of its size. But strength increases as the cross-section of the muscles. An insect is relatively strong because it's small. Enlarge it, and its legs won't be able to lift its body off the ground. A spider as big as that one"—he pointed to the Times Square Monster—"wouldn't be able to walk!"

"But it did!" said Tommy Burns. "I saw it! It jumped half a block!"

"Another impossibility," said Danny triumphantly. "The things crawl into impossible relationships with automobiles. They jump impossible distances. They are themselves impossible. They shove their legs through benches without hurting the benches. The Praying Mantis shoved its elbow into what should be a solid mass of masonry, and neither its elbow nor the masonry is hurt. More impossibility! The pictures we have of them can not possibly be fakes, yet they show an impossible state of things. What's the answer?"

"We're all crazy," said Dick skeptically.

"And so are our cameras!" Danny struck his hands together. "Now——"

The *Tabloid* photographer interrupted.

"Say," he said bitterly, "if I'm crazy, I ain't the only one. And Jeans promised me two hundred bucks to bring those pictures here. If he's crazy, he's crazy like a fox. I got to go back, too, to earn that money!"

"The thing is," said Danny, "that Dick said those pictures were taken at different times and places. The bugs at one time and place, and the backgrounds at other times and places. He's wrong! We know that! But maybe they were taken *at one time in two places!* And the other place is magnified!"

"This business has gone to your head," said Tommy Burns. "You're——"

"Amplified!" said Danny, turning upon him. "Television!"

Tommy Burns stared. Then he stiffened suddenly.

"It hasn't been done," he said slowly, groping. "Three-dimensional pictures without a screen, in natural colors. . . . It hasn't been done. But some day it will be done. . . ."

A single voice shrieked throatily in the street outside. The photographer's taxi-driver. Danny jumped to the window as a door slammed thunderously down in the street and there was a muffled sound of some one running to hide himself in the recesses of the building.

THERE was a Thing coming down the street. It was shaped rather like a mandolin, save that so monstrous a musical instrument has never been conceived even by an advertising genius. Its abdomen was twenty feet in width, and from the forward part projected a slender, cylindrical body some four or five feet in diameter and nearly forty feet long, which ended in a head like that of a hypocritical dragon. Gigantic eyes a yard and a half across looked blackly all about. Its legs—monstrously saw-toothed—moved with an apparent deliberation, but its pace was swift because of the colossal strides it took.

"We'll try it, Tommy," said Danny grimly. "It's got to be so!"

He flung up the window to its uttermost. As the Monster passed, its head only ten feet below the level of the fourth-story window, he flung a book at it, to attract its attention. Anne gasped in horror.

But the book went through the creature's head! The heavy volume with its fluttering leaves left no sign of its passage. Its flight was not intercepted by even a trace of resistance. And the creature seemed utterly unaware of the assault. Tommy heaved a second book. It struck squarely in the middle of the Monster's multi-faceted eye. It vanished behind those crystalline objects. They reappeared instantly. The book appeared again, falling and twisting. . . .

The *Tabloid* photographer was setting up his camera. Dick Thomas vanished, to reappear with a strange camera with a lens bigger than the plate it took. And suddenly a frenzy of energy seemed to possess both Danny and Tommy Burns. They flung things through the window. They bombarded the Monster in a sort of hysterical triumph. Books, magazines, stray objects. . . . Finally even a small table went hurtling through the window to penetrate the vast body of the Monster without leaving a mark or finding any impediment in it, to go crashing on down to the pavement below.

The Monster strode on, turning its head from side to side in a queer, hypocritical inquisitiveness. It had ignored the bombardment. And it vanished.

"Now we know!" said Danny in unsteady triumph. "It's a picture! A projection! Television! An image projected in three dimensions without a screen! An illusion which even photographs! But it isn't real! It can't hurt anybody!"

He dived for the telephone. He dialed furiously. And he barked his story into the transmitter and into the ear of Jeans, at the *Tabloid* office. It was not a particularly coherent story, of course, and it was almost as incredible as the appearance of the Monsters themselves. But it held together. It checked with the fact that save for a single rumor of a man carried off by giant bees—and Anne promptly negatived that possibility, as opposed to their instincts—the giant insects had ignored human beings. They had fought each other. They had preyed upon one another. They had been seen to eat one another. But there were no dead

bodies of human beings save those plainly crushed and mangled by other human beings. There were no wounded, save those injured in panics. There were no missing who might not plausibly be looked for in hospitals or the like. And machine-gun fire directed upon the Monsters had been wholly ineffective. They had ignored it. Had seemed invulnerable against it. Danny's tale explained it all.

THE *Tabloid* broke a story even bigger than the coming of the Monsters had been, in a series of extra editions that came off its presses like shells from a quick-firer gun. Only thirty minutes after the Monsters appeared in Times Square, it had published pictures of them battling there. At fifteen-minute intervals it had added to the luridness and completeness of its accounts, and to the number of its picturizations. Now, less than two hours after the city went mad with terrors to which the *Tabloid* had added skilfully concocted food, the *Tabloid* broke the biggest story yet:

MONSTERS FATAL HOAX OF UNKNOWN GENIUS!

The story was wrong, of course. The second coming of the Monsters proved sufficiently that whatever the motive might be, it was not a hoax! But this headline was written after the first appearance only of the Monsters. The death-list was long, but it was exclusively a death-list from human causes. It is now thoroughly established that not one human being was actually killed by any of the Monsters on their first appearance. Enough people died in panics, and certainly a large enough number went mad from fear, but on their first appearance the Monsters did not kill anybody. They reserved that for their second manifestation.

Within twenty minutes after Danny's call, giving the news that the Monsters were phantoms only, the *Tabloid* had the radio stations announcing the news as "exclusively from the *Tabloid*." And the third extra edition after that showed a motor-car actually driving through a monster angle-worm, with the daring human being grinning as he emerged from the Monster's body. It was a shaky grin, and he got five hundred dollars for doing it after painstaking tests had proved Danny Burton had told the truth, but it was convincing. The *Tabloid's* circulation jumped phenomenally, even though there was but one "LOVE NEST RAID" headline in the whole issue, and not a single "RUM KING" episode in any of its pages. Which constitutes a record for the *Tabloid*.

But ten minutes after the radios of the city had blared out the news that the Monsters were television products, were visible pictures in three dimensions and natural colors—just ten minutes after New York heard the news, though it still did not believe it, the Monsters disappeared! Instantly. Like so many puffs of smoke. The Monster spider, feasting horribly in Times Square, one instant was, and then it was not. The giant yellow slug which writhed amid the uncomfortable confines of the Forty-eighth Street subway station, vanished like a candle-flame. The centipedes of forty-foot length, the scurrying tumble-bugs, the huge and gruesome creatures that leaped about the city's roofs—each one abruptly ceased to be.

One moment the city was listening incredulously to its radios saying that it could not believe its eyes; that its toll of dead had died needlessly; its mental breakdowns had no just cause. The next instant the Monsters had vanished.

The city breathed first a mighty sigh of relief, and then it went into a passion

of rage against the unknown man or men who had sent the plague of terror upon the metropolis. Its hospitals were filled to overflowing. Its morgues were crowded. Madmen screamed in terror that would never end. New York demanded the blood of those who had caused its madness. In part the demand was a thirst for revenge; but in part, too, it was still terror, because New York was still afraid.

And next morning its fears were justified. The Monsters came back. And they came back in a fashion which the *Tabloid* was again the first to tell of. Its extra early super-special three-star extraordinary edition unprecedentedly filled nearly half its front page with headlines instead of pictures. The headlines ran:

MONSTERS RETURN AND KILL
No Longer Phantoms!
Deadly Creatures Now Actual!
Hundreds Killed and Devoured!

The picture which filled a bare half of the front page was that of the interior of the elephant-shed in the small Central Park zoo at Sixty-sixth Street. A part of the roof of the shed was torn off. The largest of the two elephants was shown as a shrunken bulk, drained of all its fluids. Upon it squatted a monstrous, loathsome bulk. The bulk was a spider, its belly seeming swollen with the juices it had sucked from the dead elephant's body. There were few other pictures. Even the *Tabloid* could not print some of the pictures its photographers secured.

The second visitation of the Monsters had begun.

4

IT WAS bright and very sunshiny where Danny and Anne Adams rode in the second car of a swiftly moving cortege. The day was perfect. Little cotton-wool balls of cloud drifted with a smug placidness in a sky of deepest and most improbable blue. New York, behind them, was now the scene of such horror as even the night before had not approached. But they had left before the Monsters returned, and on this smooth New Jersey road there was only the swiftly moving cavalcade of cars and a blue sky overhead and green things growing on either hand.

This was a sort of scouting expedition, following a line that Tommy Burns had mapped out the night before. He and Dick Thomas rode with Danny and Anne. They followed an army staff car, filled with men wearing Sam Browne belts and an expression of extreme competence. There were the crudely shaped, unmilitary muzzles of air-cooled machine-guns sticking up over the back of that car ahead. Where Danny rode, his ribs were jabbed at by one of the innumerable gadgets Tommy Burns had bought for his television apparatus and now had adapted hopefully for further use. Tommy had taken Danny's analysis of the situation, the night before, not only as an explanation of what was happening, but of what might be done about it. He had thrown together some apparatus to modify his short-wave receiver and had hooked it up on a loop for directional reception. And the previous night Tommy had searched the ether feverishly in the half-hour or so between Danny's telephoned story to the *Tabloid* and the abrupt disappearance of all the Monsters. He'd found a consistent disturbance in the ether and had plotted its line. It was that line they were roughly following now. With time in which to work, he could have moved his apparatus and secured another bearing on the transmitter he felt sure projected the Monsters, but with the disappearance of the Monsters

the short-wave disturbance broke off abruptly. Now he was talking uneasily:

"I know I didn't get the carrier-wave." He was nervous. Much depended on him. Too much. "It was too short for my outfit. I was getting a heterodyne, or a harmonic. And—well, that might not have come from one station. It might be a heterodyne from two stations, which might register the line to one station or the other, but also might register the line where the heterodyning signals were most nearly equal."

Danny frowned. He hadn't Tommy Burns' knowledge of radio, but he had heard him babble of television and radio until he had absorbed some knowledge despite himself.

"The colors were all right, weren't they, Anne?"

"Absolutely right," said Anne. She looked tired, but borne up by excitement. After the vanishing of the Monsters, she and Danny had been closeted with police officials and later with representatives of the national government most of the night. As the original discoverers of the fact that the Monsters were projections of some sort, their chain of reasoning was important. Tommy Burns had been called in too, of course, and even Dick Thomas was accepted for the time as the most available expert on photography.

Danny made a vague gesture.

"Just guessing," he said doubtfully; "to project anything in natural colors means the color-screens have to be pretty closely adjusted. And two stations any distance apart would have a ticklish job synchronizing them. Besides, the Monsters weren't projections of film. They were projected images of things that were living at the time their images were amplified and put on the air. Like television. So the chances are there was only one station sending."

Dick Thomas said curtly:

"The damned things showed up in three dimensions, though. Not even as stereoscopic images. You'd have to have projecting stations at right angles to each other to get all the details. You'd have to!"

Anne said tiredly:

"But there are two things I can't understand. All the Monsters were immature; small; not full-grown insects. Why? And they kept to the streets. Nobody has mentioned that. They couldn't see people, it's fairly clear. But they could see the streets and the buildings! If they sometimes walked one foot above the pavement, they never walked through brick walls. If they weren't material—and we know they weren't—why didn't they? They could!"

The car immediately behind them, an army radio-truck, began to blow its horn furiously. The car ahead checked. The whole cavalcade came to a halt. A uniformed man ran forward to the leading car. As he passed the one in which Danny rode he called:

"Monsters back in New York! They're eating people! They're eating 'em."

As motors cut off, a loud-speaker in the radio truck could be heard blaring throatily. A voice was audible amid the peaceful green pine-woods, deep and hurried and nearly hysterical.

"The Monsters have reappeared. . . . Every one is warned to keep to their houses. The Monsters of last night were not actual creatures, but the Monsters of this morning seem to be. They are known to have devoured nearly all the animals in the Central Park zoo. . . . It is encouraging, though, that army officers say that if they can kill, they can now be killed. Last night machine-gun bullets were of no use. Today, they can hardly fail to be fatal to the Monsters. Regular troops are being moved from Governor's Island, equipped with guns, grenades, and

flame-projectors. . . . Since the Monsters can be attacked, now, it is only a matter of hours before they are wiped out, but in the meantime, keep to your houses! Stay indoors! Do not show yourselves at windows! Make no movements nor any noises which will draw the attention of the Monsters! Then you will be safe! More troops are being rushed. . . ."

There was a click. The loud-speaker was cut off. Somebody said in a shaken voice:

"That's the general broadcast. It's lies. Here's the short-wave to Washington—and us."

A thinner, still more hurried voice began to snap crisp phrases from a smaller loud-speaker. And those phrases were horrible in their significance.

"After tearing off the roof of the elephant-shed, a Monster spider killed the larger of the two elephants and sucked it dry. The zoo was overrun with Monsters. The rhinoceros was torn to bits by what seem to have been gigantic beetles. For the first time, giant ants have appeared. They are about four feet long and are exploring the city everywhere. Several of them have been seen carrying human beings in their mandibles. . . ."

Danny felt acutely sick.

"No Monsters have been seen farther north than One Hundred Eighty-second Street," the voice went on crisply. *"They have, however, showed themselves all the way down to the Battery. Also, no Monsters have so far appeared in Brooklyn, nor have any of them crossed the bridges. It is reported that one giant centipede, attacking the west-bound traffic on the Williamsburg Bridge, searched truck after truck for living beings, and about one-fourth of the way across the bridge suddenly vanished. It is believed that he was somehow destroyed, perhaps by coming in contact with a charged wire. His entire body seemed to lose all its members. The remains were merely a horrible mass of bloody pulp. . . ."*

ANNE ran away, putting her hands over her ears. Danny remained, listening resolutely, though an unconquerable nausea filled him.

Presently he went back to the car in which he had ridden, a sickly white in color. Tommy Burns was working feverishly with his short-wave radio receiver.

"It's on again!" he panted. "My God! It's trying to blow out my tubes! I daren't tune in even the heterodyned wave clean! It would blow anything! I'm all detuned, and I've got everything shielded, and still it comes through all around the compass. Go get one of those radio men from the truck back there."

Danny jerked his thumb. Dick Thomas sprinted. Danny said sickly:

"Tommy! I've got an idea! The Monsters last night were phantoms, were images, not material things. We threw things right through them, and the man who drove through that earthworm for the *Tabloid* said it was hollow inside. He could see lights. Its internal organs weren't projected. Just the outside. As if it were a balloon. So when they projected it, only the moving outside surfaces of the creature were projected. You see?"

Tommy Burns gazed at him abstractedly, his hands working the controls of the short-wave receiver.

"A mirror-image hasn't any thickness," said Danny hopelessly, "but a silvered glass ball will make images with no thickness which enclose something. Those Monsters, last night, were images with no thickness enclosing emptiness. And they weren't actual substance. If those Monsters today were flesh and blood, they couldn't walk. They'd be too heavy! But they're walking and killing things and people. So they can't be actual sub-

stance either. They can't be! But they act like it! Tommy, how is it done?"

Tommy said:

"There's power. Good God! There's more power on these short waves than I knew there could be on earth!"

"I talked to Millikan once," said Danny hopelessly. "I interviewed him for the *Tabloid*. A bunch of us, in a sort of press-conference. I had to mess up what he said. The *Tabloid* doesn't want straight science. But he said energy—power—is just another form of matter, for substance. My head's working over its head, Tommy. I'm drowning in stuff I'm trying to get straight. But a magnetic field acts like a substance. Like an elastic band, pulling things toward itself. Or pushing them. Only it isn't a substance. And a magnetic field hasn't any surface. That's why it reaches out and pulls and pushes. Tommy, if a magnetic field had a surface, it would act exactly like a substance. . . . My God, Tommy! Those damned things are killing people back in New York! They're killing them! And eating them!"

He wrung his hands. Dick Thomas came back with a man from the radio truck. The radio man was white and sick like everybody else. Dick Thomas stared at Danny, wringing his hands.

"What you got?" demanded the radio man of Tommy Burns.

"Power!" said Tommy bitterly. "Those short waves are on and I can't tune them in for directional because if I do they'll blow my tubes. Everything! I'm tuned somewhere near a heterodyne wave now, and it was only half a meter yesterday. But if I tune it in, I'll blow everything! And I've got to tune it to locate the damned sending-station! You see?"

The radio man pulled himself together.

"Let's look." He plunged into an inspection of Tommy Burns' apparatus. It was home-made, and there were makeshifts which the army man, with an army man's bland indifference to expenses paid by the government, felt a sort of scorn for. But it was receiving on half a meter wave-length, and there are not many receiving-sets which can go down to half a meter. Which called for respect, too.

Anne caught at Danny's arm.

"Danny!" she cried desperately. "What's going to be done? We've got to stop it somehow. . . ."

"Have you any people back there?" asked Danny in sudden terror. He had no idea why he should be more concerned about possible relatives of Anne than any other people, but it was so. He had been with her for sixteen hours, in which time they had talked constantly at fever-heat of things entirely apart from themselves. There had been no mention of personalities at all. But now Danny said anxiously, "How's your ankle where the car caught it? I forgot to ask."

"I'd forgotten all about it. It's all right. And I haven't any people anywhere. But Danny! How is that thing—those Monsters—going to be stopped?"

There was a milling, helpless confusion about the radio truck. These cars had started out rather hopelessly to scout along a line Tommy Burns had laid out. It had promised little to begin with. Now, with the Monsters again in New York, it promised less. It was a bearing, within three degrees, of the sending-station of the Monsters. But they had come twenty miles from New York with no sign of anything they could investigate. And a three-degree arc in twenty miles amounts to a good-sized slice of territory. Here it would be an area at least two miles wide, in any hundred-yard space of which half a dozen concealed stations might be hidden. And this part of New Jersey was wooded and not thickly settled. . . .

The men who had set out not too

hopefully now listened helplessly while a loud-speaker told them that the Monsters were no longer phantoms, but ghastly reality. While it told them of a tenement-house invaded by three of the smaller Monsters—spiders with bellies only a yard across—and of the holocaust there. Of a giant Praying Mantis which stood in its unspeakable "spectral attitude" athwart a street filled with a fear-maddened mob of fugitives, and of what the giant creature did when the mob tried to flee. . . .

The loud-speaker went on, drearily. The armed party listened helplessly, sick with rage and horror. The radio man with Tommy Burns suddenly spoke in a tone of inspiration.

"Say! Half a turn of the lead-in around a soft-iron core! That'll damp the stuff. Try that. Then a full turn if we need it. Come on!"

Danny and Anne and Dick Thomas stood helplessly in the sunlight. It seemed to them as if over the miles of distance separating them from New York they would hear the screaming noises of the city. The city, in a frenzy of despairing horror while the Monsters overran its ways, would be uttering a million-throated cry of despair. . . .

"I've got to talk," said Danny unsteadily. "I know it won't do any good. This stuff is over my head. But—I think better, talking. If—if a magnetic field had a surface, it would act like a substance. D'you see, Dick? I'm trying to think. . . . Those Monsters are projections like motion-picture projections. Only they must be television projections of living things. Something is focussed upon the city, to project amplified images of creatures in another place. . . ."

"It would take an aplanatic lens," said Dick wearily, "for depth of focus. I don't know anything about the radio stuff . . ."

"And I said a magnetic field with a surface—a definite surface—would be like a substance except it would be invisible. . . ."

"Not necessarily," said Dick wearily. "Magnetism affects light. It shifts the plane of polarized light, anyhow. They've made cameras to photograph different stages of an electric spark by using that principle."

"Maybe—maybe it would even be visible!" Danny struck his hands together. "Something which looked like matter and felt like matter, but wasn't anything but a field of magnetism! If they could project magnetic fields, Dick! If they could! Which would have surfaces! When they were brought to focus they'd be visible, because then they'd have surfaces; and having surfaces, they'd act like substances! Out of focus they wouldn't! That's it! D'you see, Dick?"

"But they wouldn't be material," said Anne drearily. "They couldn't eat people. . . ."

"With a certain strength of field," said Danny eagerly, "they'd just be visible! Like a soap-bubble! They would reflect light as a soap-bubble does, and offer no more resistance to puncture! If those phantom Monsters had been soap-bubbles which reformed after they broke, we'd never have noticed so slight an appearance of substance! We wouldn't! A slight magnetic field, with a surface. That's all they were! And the Monsters that eat, they're fields, too, only their field is stronger. They resist puncture. They're amplified magnetic fields, images of the actual insects wherever the damned things are being broadcast from, but images which resist puncture——"

"How do they see people?" asked Anne wearily.

Danny was taken aback only for an instant.

"If the devils who're doing this can

project a magnified magnetic-field image of an insect for people to see, why can't they project a reduced magnetic-field image of people for the insects to see—and try to devour? It's television! Television field-images of the city, in miniature, for the insects to crawl over, and television field-images of the insects to prey on the city. That's why the pictures were wrong! That's why spiders walked sometimes a foot off the ground! Why that Praying Mantis stuck its arm into masonry! The images didn't exactly coincide! And it didn't matter, then, because the fields were weak. . . ."

"Crazy," said Dick Thomas hopelessly.

But Anne's eyes glowed into Danny's.

"I think—I think——"

TOMMY BURNS suddenly yelled with joy.

"We got it! We got it! There's the line!"

There was a roar from the men who had gathered about the radio truck. Helpless, because depending upon a single bearing and that not made with any instrument of precision, they had been stunned by the messages that were coming through. Futility seemed to paralyze them. But now a new reading of the sending-station's bearing tuned their horror into rage, their feeling of helplessness into fury, and the paralysis that came of a conviction of futility turned into a hungry hatred that sent them racing to their places.

"Over there!" Tommy Burns was saying vengefully to the officer in command of the whole expedition. "That's the line, exactly! We had to take a turn and a half of the lead-in to choke down the power so we could use a directional on it. We checked up on three different wavelengths—I think one heterodyne and two harmonics. They all point the same way. And it can't be far! It can't! That stuff was too powerful!"

The officer had his map spread out. He was checking up by compass and his present, known location. The line, drawn on the map, was wholly clear. It started at a thread of solid black which indicated a double-width concrete road, and it went past a church, and across a space some two miles in width on which each feature of the ground was indicated with the minuteness of a modern topographical survey, and then it passed through the dots which indicated a straggling small town, and then another, and another. . . .

"With the power you talk about," the officer said crisply, "they'd be fools to shoot it in concentrated form through a town. It would lose a lot and possibly start fires by heating up metal objects. So it probably isn't beyond here"—his finger touched the first town—"and if it's a radio wave, no matter how short it is, common sense says they're not broadcasting it from down in a hollow. So. . . ." He traced contour lines with grim care. "The chances are it's on this particular hill. Two miles away. An isolated spot. Not even foot-paths are shown on the map, here."

He blew his whistle shrilly. Men raced from the different cars and snapped to attention. He pointed out the objective.

"The chances are twenty to one that the Monsters are being produced, somehow, and flung into New York from right here!" he told them. He did not know, of course, of Danny's reasoning and conclusions. "If we smash that place, we prevent more Monsters going to New York. Here are your orders."

He gave them, very grimly and very precisely. There were six cars besides the radio-truck, and they would approach the place from six different directions.

"Use your heads," he said savagely. "I

don't care how you get there. If there's resistance—and there probably will be—smash it! But the most important job any man of us ever had is smashing any electrical apparatus in that place! You can figure that every minute that's wasted costs lives behind us. Smash things! Stop that outfit from working! Pulverize it! Now move!"

A car pulled out of line and streaked away. It had machine-guns and gas-bombs, and it contained eight men. A second car roared away. The armored car—fourth in line—rumbled and growled and suddenly swung off the concrete and surged away on a dirt road which should lead it finally to meadowland and rolling hills, unwooded if the map was right. One by one, like shots from a gun, the cars flashed out of sight to take up their posts. The advance would take place from all directions at once.

"Now, wait a minute," snapped the officer. "You radio men, send this stuff back. I don't know what's waiting for us. We may not get back ourselves. Miss Adams, you'd better stay behind here. A car will probably come along and pick you up sooner or later. I don't know why you were allowed to come anyway, though you're better off than you would be in New York."

"I shan't stay back," said Anne coolly. "A car might come. But also, if Danny's right, they might be sending Monsters. He knows how the whole thing's done, now. And if they think of looking here, they can see us."

The officer stared sharply.

"If you have any ideas," he said urgently, "you'd better send them right away. We'll be late!"

"It may be nonsense," said Danny uneasily. "But anyhow——" He went dubiously to the radio truck and talked doggedly into the microphone. He finished. "It's worth while trying an electro-magnet on one of the Monsters, anyhow. If it's what I think, the Monster will be caught and held just as if it were a mass of iron."

"Now send my report," commanded the officer, "and then follow us if you can. Keep transmitting and telling what you see. We're off."

The two remaining cars shot into motion. A mile, two miles, and then down a dim path, through dense brush which the massive vehicles crushed beneath them. There was a tearing rattle in the air before them. A machine-gun. Suddenly there was a sharp concussion. The spitting of rifles and the dull booming of gas-bombs. And also there were one or two outcries, of men in the presence of death.

With a rush, the two cars plunged ahead. The thin brush parted and dropped behind. Then they saw the battle. It was such a battle as had never before taken place on earth.

5

THERE was a long, low structure sprawling out over the top of a not very steep hill. There were trees growing about it, and it seemed a pleasant place at first glance. There was a rather old-fashioned building which looked like a dwelling-house, and an elongated addition which was much more modern. The addition seemed to have a glass roof. And there were the remnants of flower-beds, wholly neglected, and signs everywhere that this place had once been the center of a small country estate such as every New Yorker some day hopes to retire to—and can not endure when he tries it.

But that was merely the background; a sort of backdrop of peaceful open country which formed a frame for—Monsters.

When the car in which Danny and the

rest were riding came careening out of the surrounding brushwood, a machine-gun was rasping fiercely over to the right. An armored car was rocking and lurching and rolling into view from the left. And three other cars were breaking cover within sight. They were plunging for the building upon the hilltop. And Monsters converged swiftly to attack them.

Nowhere did the Monsters reach such monstrous bulk as here. The giant tarantula which sprang upon the armored car had a belly like a balloon. Its legs were like masts. It covered a hundred and fifty feet in one vast leap, and then flung itself ferociously upon the car which because it moved must be prey. The armored car crashed into the descending mandibles, a three-pounder gun booming desperately. A machine-gun—two of them—roared frantically. And then the armored car was a puny thing of crushed metal which the titanic Thing out of hell was mouthing at, scratching with its monstrous fangs to puncture and drain out the juices all things which moved should possess. . . .

The Monsters that whirled upon the other cars and ran with incredible swiftness to attack them were not so huge, but they were huge enough. In seconds the car to the right, racing on with spitting machine-guns, seemed to be buried beneath vast bulbous bodies which fought first to seize it, and then fought each other. . . . Something long and jointed arose, glistening, and waited with a cunning immobility for another car to come within its reach. . . . And that car swerved madly, lurching and bouncing upon the uneven ground, and raced alongside the Monster's body, raking it with a furious blast of fire. But as it raced on, bound for the building on the hilltop, the Monster whirled like a flash and leaped after it. . . . And a centipede fight: not only with its jaws, but with every barbed and spiked joint of its many, many legs. . . . It was standing over the overturned car when a spider leaped upon it and the two vast Monsters battled terribly above the car. . . . A machine-gun began to spit hysterically from the wreckage beneath the gigantic, horrible forms. . . .

These things happened in seconds only. Danny saw them in single, isolated flashes. The terrain was alive with Monsters, of every conceivable form, of every imaginable sort of ghastliness. There were two Things fighting insanely a hundred yards ahead. There was something else feasting horribly upon the still-writhing body of something else more horrible still. . . . A Monster caterpillar was flinging its body about spasmodically while a Creature all legs and hellishness slashed and slashed and slashed at it. . . .

"They—can't smell," said Danny from a constricted throat. "They jump at people because they move. But they can't—smell! They *can't!*"

Anne's grip ot his arm was terrified and tight.

"N-no insect would attack a thing that—didn't smell like food and didn't move!" she gasped.

"If we're attacked," barked Danny, though his voice was unsteady, "if we're attacked, stop the car and everybody sit still!"

Anne screamed. A leg, a monstrous, saw-toothed leg the size of a girder for the hugest bridge ever built, descended before the car. There were other legs all about. They moved and quivered with a horrible life. The Thing was huger than any elephant. It was huger than any imaginable animal. It was more vast than the ancient reptiles. It was unbelievable. It was impossible. It was——

Monstrous palpi seized the car. It stopped. The chauffeur became a frozen,

unreasoning statue of pure fear. He sat with brakes on, his eyes wide and staring. . . . And then there was a mighty impact somewhere near by, and a terrific, soundless battle went on above. . . .

Danny had hit on the essential weakness of the Monsters as means of defense for the house upon the hilltop. They could not smell. All insects live by their sense of smell vastly more than by sight or sound. And incredible as it seemed, the slaughter of human beings by Monsters was murder done remotely. The Monsters which ravaged New York were enormously magnified images of tiny creatures many miles away. Those images possessed, not actuality, but surfaces which resisted deformation. They duplicated the movements of their minute originals. And those minute originals saw the enormously ensmalled images of people—which images also possessed surfaces—projected in their midst from many miles away. Just as the Monsters, to the human beings in New York, lacked the attribute of sound which would have made them wholly real, so the images of human beings lacked the attribute of smell which to the insects would have made them wholly real. The tiny insects attacked the human images—and the Monster images attacked the human beings—simply because they moved; through the same instinct which makes a dog leap at a motor-car because it moves.

In a city full of people who would be hysterical at sight of the grisly creatures, the Monsters were a real and a terrible menace. When crowds saw them, they fled. When creatures fled, the Monsters attacked. But here, used as a means of defense for the house on the hilltop. . . .

THE unthinkable battle above the motor-car surged away. There were creatures bigger than houses in this battle to the death, fighting with an unspeakable ferocity in an absolute absence of sound. But somewhere, men made noises. There were scattered, useless shots. Somewhere a bomb went off. Then two grenades. Then a man screamed. . . .

The chauffeur shrieked and bolted. He fled for the seeming safety of the woods behind. And Something soared through the air in a deadly leap and fell upon him. . . .

Danny scrambled into the driver's seat.

"Keep still!" he said between his teeth. "Anne, for God's sake, don't move!"

Gigantic, multiple eyes stared down at the car. A huge, an incredible limb reached out and touched the hood. Horror bordering upon insanity filled those within it. But there were only four, now. Danny and Anne and Tommy and Dick. They were motionless; perhaps with iron self-control, perhaps paralyzed by fear.

But Danny's voice went on, steadied now and commanding.

"Keep still! Keep still! The beast's just curious! We haven't any smell, to him. He'll think we're pebbles. . . ."

The Thing moved away, seeking food. . . . And Tommy jammed in the clutch and shot the car twenty yards ahead. But he stopped again as Something leaped. . . . And the Horror felt of the car, and smelled of it, and it had no smell. . . .

A machine-gun was still going desperately. But its bullets were useless. Worse than useless. The Monsters were surfaces only. Their inward organs were not projected. The bullets tore through the outer surfaces—which closed behind them!—and tore through the farther surfaces, and did not harm the actual insects. The bullets penetrated only pseudo-actual images. The actual insects were in that long, low building on the hilltop. . . .

It seemed that centuries passed while Danny crept toward the hilltop. A centi-

pede crawled completely over the car, while it was still, and did not harm it. Two monstrous beetles, fighting furiously, bumped into it and nearly toppled it over. Three separate times small scuttling spiders—their bellies were only feet in diameter, instead of yards—investigated the thing which had moved; their fangs bared, their fiendish small eyes glowing evilly, and went away in quest of something which both moved and smelled of food. . . .

And suddenly there were no Monsters near by. A machine-gun rasped, and broke off. A revolver popped empty. Grenades and gas-bombs exploded futilely. . . . But the car Danny drove was near to the long low building which looked as if it had once been the center of a country estate such as New Yorkers dream of and can not endure. No more than fifty yards to the front door. No more than thirty! There was a man by the door, watching the Monsters. He was grinning nervously. . . .

"They can't come here," said Danny. His voice shook horribly. "They aren't focussed on this place. That man—I'm going to kill him! Tommy, you go in and smash things. Help him, Dick! I'm going to kill that man. . . ."

With a roar, the car leaped forward. It crashed through weedy, neglected flower-beds. It smashed down a fence. It plowed through soft ground and the man on the porch gasped frantically and turned to face them. He gaped at them incredulously. It was not possible that any living human beings could have crossed that area in which mountainous deadly things fought and battled and slaughtered every living thing. . . . Then he cried out and snatched an automatic pistol into view. He fired hastily, already swinging to flee into the house. . . .

And Danny leaped from the car not fifteen feet behind him and shot him down—and a man screamed horribly, off among the Monsters—and then in a cold passion that was pure horror expressed in action, Danny pumped his weapon empty into the toppling, spasmodically jerking figure. The last two shots were fired into a form that kicked convulsively upon the floor of the porch.

Then Danny stooped and picked up the weapon with which the other man had shot at him.

"He killed God knows how many people in New York," he said steadily. "Come on! There may be more of them."

THE other two were leaping behind him. They flung themselves at the door. It flew open with an effect of anticlimax before them. A loud humming noise beat upon them from within and they went savagely toward it, weapons out and ready.

A second door. They crashed it in. They were in a great clear space, made evidently by tearing out floors and partitions in the old-style house. There were great glass tubes in which wires and grids showed themselves distorted and strange. There was a flickering blue light which beat upon a queerly shaped grid which was black in itself, and yet seemed to emit an indefinite reddish glow, and all of this was enclosed in thick glass. And there was a huge coil, more than man-height high, from which the humming noise came. There was a feeling of power, of incredible power, quietly at work amid this humming noise. But there was no other human being in sight.

"Smash things!" said Danny, in a tone of ice. He fired at the glass plates about the blue light. A crack leaped across the glass. Air whistled as into a vacuum. The blue light grew fierce. The reddish glow became a savage flame. The humming

noise from the huge coil grew louder until it was a roar, then a thunder, and then an unbearable tumult. The glass tubes glowed iridescent. The elements within them became incandescent.

"You've shorted it!" panted Tommy Burns.

Dick Thomas flung open a door. Something stirred within it. Dick Thomas fired grimly, and a choked cry followed. He plunged in and came out again, stuffing a welter of papers and photographs into his pocket.

"Nothing more there," he said composedly. "Just one man. I killed him. Let's look this way. I've picked up some photos that ought to be good."

The roar from the coil in the corner was now an insupportable din. A figure ran into view, and Danny whirled. But it was Anne.

"What's happened? Are you—hurt?" Only the thin tones of her voice could be heard above the uproar, but the terror in her eyes was only for him. Danny caught her hand.

"This way!" he roared, trying to make himself audible. There was still the long, glass-roofed shed to examine. He plunged for a doorway seeming to open there. Subconsciously, he knew that the coil in the corner, from which all this din was coming, was beginning to smoke. It was heating from the passage of an unimaginable current through its winding. The roar it emitted was become a bellow. Later on, of course, it was decided that this noise came from the alterations in the volume of its armature under a varying magnetic field. And the estimates of the magnetic field necessary to produce such changes of volume led to estimates of the amount of power available in this laboratory of the Monster-makers. But now, of course, it was merely a thing which cried out as if in anguish, and its coil smoked and heated. . . .

A door slammed upon the uproar and lessened it a little. And now the four of them were in a place amazingly different from anything they could possibly have foreseen. It was a long shed, plank-walled and glass-roofed. There were two tables on which were flat things of shining metal, and there were gigantic frames of metal which held plates of some black substance near those tables. There were innumerable tiny boxes upon shelves along the wall, and each one was faced with wire gauze as if to serve as a cage for something very small indeed. . . .

Something exploded in the room they had left. Smoke shot upward, visible through the clear glass roof. But in this long shed there was a queer, fictitious tranquillity. Danny searched for human beings. There were none. Dick Thomas gripped his arm suddenly and pointed to the black plates within their frames.

"Those black things!" he shouted. "They're lenses! They don't focus light but they're lenses! Look at their curvature!"

"We'll smash 'em," snapped Danny. He sprang to the supports. But the supports were massive. There were micrometer-screws and vernier dials. Dick Thomas came quickly.

"Throw 'em out of focus!" he panted. "Don't destroy them! Throw 'em out of focus! That'll stop the Monsters!"

"You do it!" commanded Danny. He turned to survey the tables. Dick would know more about lenses than he would. He felt Dick moving frantically. He knew that things moved. But Danny was staring at the gleaming sheet of metal on the larger table. It was twenty feet long and five wide, and the white sheet of metal . . . was a city! A city in miniature, made all of gleaming metal!

There were streets and houses, unbelievably tiny and incredibly perfect. Windows, doors, pent-houses and even chimneys, with impossibly thread-like projections that were flagpoles, and gossamer webbings that were fire-escapes. And in the streets there were cars and trolleys, and even infinitesimal scratches that must be trolley-tracks, and specks that would be—that must be—human beings. A roughening of the pavement in what would be Union Square. A crowd. A string of specks in orderly array along what would be Riverside Drive. Automobiles. . . .

At first glance, Danny knew that he was looking at a model of New York. But such a model! *And over it crawled a multitude of tiny insects!* Minute hunting-spiders, questing mites to devour. Baby centipedes, in search of things more helpless still. The model of New York was swarming with miniature hunters, puny demons of ferocity—*and it was the many-times magnified and amplified images of these small creatures which made the actual New York a hell of terror!*

Danny reached out his hand—and jerked it back.

"Smash those lenses, for God's sake!" he said hysterically. "I could smash the Monsters with my fingers, but I'd wreck the city doing it!"

HE HAD reached out his hand to kill a speck of a spider which was busy upon that narrow ribbon which was Riverside Drive. And he knew that if he did, a many-times-magnified image of his hand, with perhaps millions of times the strength he exerted, would reach down out of the sky and crush buildings, human beings, and the very ground itself!

"I've—got them off!" panted Dick. "They're heavy!"

The lenses crashed to the floor, loosened from their frames. And suddenly a monstrous detonation sounded beyond the door through which they had entered. Flames spouted beneath the door itself. The column of smoke visible through the glass roof was a dense black cloud.

"Power's off," said Tommy Burns, his teeth chattering. "I—I saw it go! Lord! The power they had. . . . We've got to get out of here! That fire's coming through!"

There was smoke already seeping into this place. Danny gazed swiftly all about. The smaller table, with its smaller set of black, opaque lenses. . . . He raced to it. There, in gleaming metal, was the infinitely tiny replica of the building they stood in. Its own structure was fenced in by wire gauze. A second fence of wire gauze extended in a larger circle outside it. And between the two rings of gauze there swarmed a multitude of small and battling creatures.

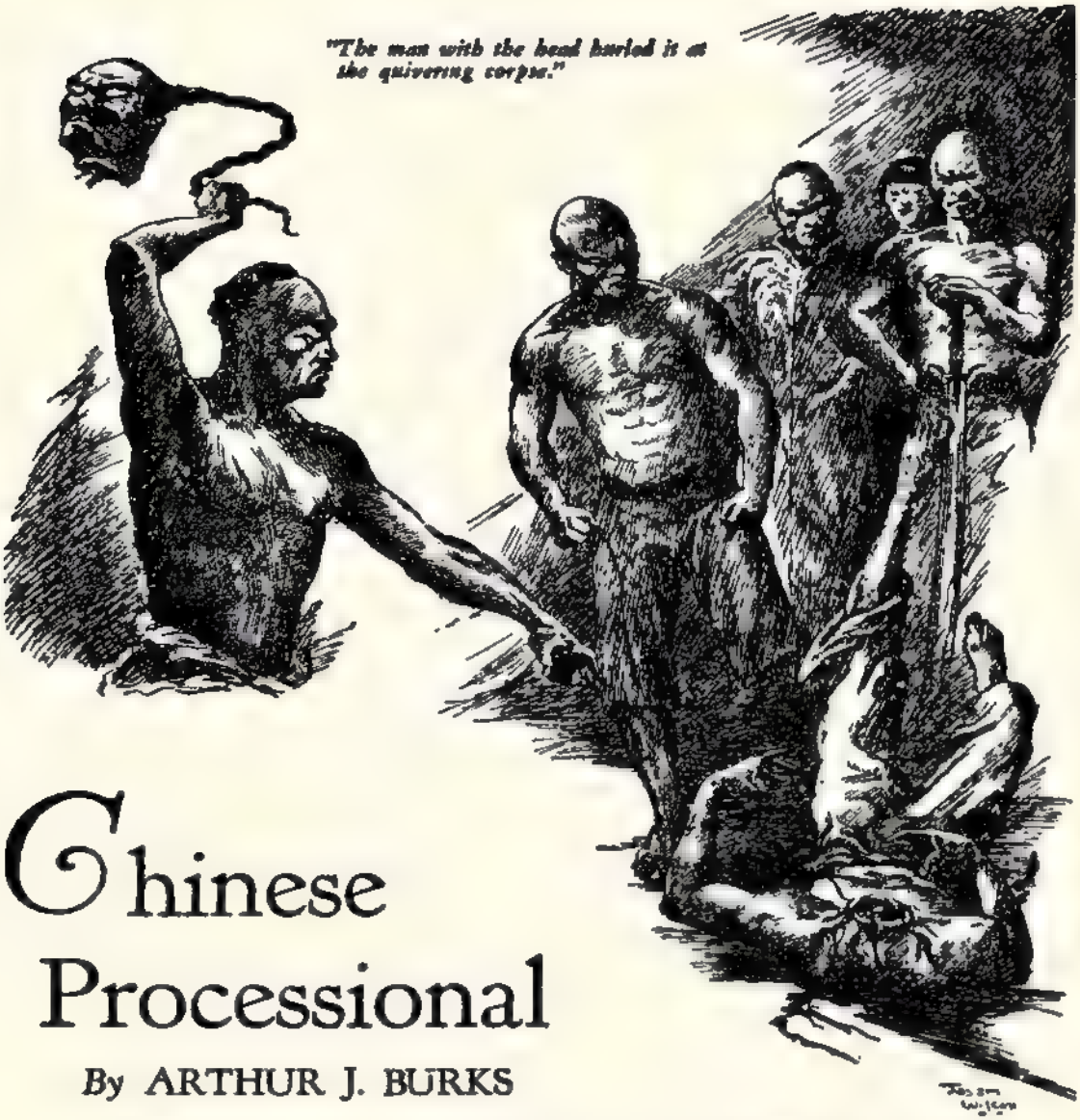
"The Monsters we came through," said Danny, sick. "They projected 'em right around themselves when they saw us coming."

The smoke was thicker. Much thicker. Danny took out his pen-knife, suddenly, and set to work. The metal was soft. He dug. The smoke grew strangling. A door was open somewhere. There was no longer the humming roar from the coil in the other room. That was silent, now. Instead, there came a vast crackling and the roaring of a fire feeding upon something infinitely inflammable. . . . The door burned through. Tongues of flame leaped into the room.

"Come on!" shouted Tommy Burns.

Danny had stopped by the larger table. Some one materialized through the thick smoke. A hand grasped his arm. It was Anne.

(Please turn to page 143)



"The man with the head hurled it at the quivering corpse."

Chinese Processional

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

A strange, eery story of the wrath of the Dowager Empress of China, and a weird beheading

IT IS true, perhaps, that I am in some small measure psychic; but that does not entirely explain the events of that strange night in the Summer Palace. The Summer Palace lies toward the Western Hills, some seventeen miles from Peking. To this palace—which isn't a palace in the true sense of the word, but a vast group of buildings upon an artificial hill—went Her Majesty Tzu Hsi, to rest from the cares of state, and there went her predecessors during the existence of the Manchu Court. It was a summer home for the royal family, its retainers, eunuchs, serving-maids and ladies in waiting.

The artificial hill rises some five hundred feet from the level of Kun Ming Lake, which is also artificial, and there are many stories told of the place. Here

for a time the Tragic Emperor was held prisoner . . . and the inner wall of bricks which imprisoned him may be seen if one travels with a competent guide, alongside the house in which the Empress lived while sojourning in the Summer Palace.

I had spent one night in the Forbidden City. I now wished to repeat the experience in the Summer Palace. It, too, was filled with the breath of China's past. The great ones of the Empire had ridden its pleasure barges on the lake, while goldfish of many hues and shapes and sizes darted through the crystal-clear water away from the boats.

During the day I had an opportunity to enter the royal boathouse, which had not been opened since the death of Her Majesty in 1908. The palace was guarded by Cantonese soldiers. I had an argument with one of them, which was none the less acrimonious in that neither of us understood a word the other said . . . and I was, frankly, afraid to duck away from my party and hide in the Summer Palace.

But I did return to the place, just the same. I found myself at the Jade Girdle Bridge, which spans an arm of Kun Ming, just around ten o'clock in the evening. I wasn't far from the Bronze Bull, which all tourists know, and most others have seen in photographs.

Sure that none had seen me, I dropped into Kun Ming and began to swim. My watch had been removed from my wrist and placed under my beret so that water would not befoul it. Thus secure I slipped easily through the water under a bright moon. Small fish broke the water as I swam. I felt them touch my legs. The snaky stalks of lotus tangled my legs and tired me to shake them loose. I had no desire to drown in any lake, artificial or otherwise.

As I swam, the palace on the Hill of Ten Thousand Years seemed to sway and rock with the motion of my swimming. Moonlight on the many windows of the palace buildings made those windows—those of them which vandals had not broken—look like the glaring eyes of dragons. To think of dragons brought up strange fancies. Once before I had visited the Summer Palace, guided by a faker who claimed to be a Manchu. Of course he wasn't, but he had taken me to the Jade Fountain, whose waters empty into Kun Ming. In the old days only the Empress could drink from the fountain. Now anybody could who had a Mex dime and didn't mind drinking out of a community cup.

The guide had told me there was a dragon in the pool under the Jade Fountain, and when I queried him about it he naïvely informed me that the story was true; that he himself had seen the dragon. Being sensitive to impressions, and the water being black and cold, I distinctly felt the scaly bodies of several dragons rub against me as I made the swim toward the Summer Palace. Had I been seen I'd have stopped a few bullets . . . even though Chinese are notoriously inaccurate with firearms. However, nothing of the kind happened. I headed toward a sort of canal which entered the lake. This canal passed one end of the Summer Palace, and the famous marble boat. I had had tea on the marble boat on occasion. There were stories about the boat, too. It seems that Her Majesty made a tax levy to build a Chinese navy. Instead of building a navy she took the money to improve the Summer Palace. When her board of ministers insisted that she show her subjects a navy for their taxes, she built the marble boat at the edge of Kun Ming and said, in effect:

"There's your navy. Sail it away."

Since it is indeed of marble, and so heavy that a thousand horses could scarcely budge it, the marble boat has never sailed anywhere. It represents a jest of Tzu Hsi, known in her day, and to history, as "Old Buddha," because of her wisdom.

I SWAM into the canal, heading for the boathouse I had visited during the day, where two of the royal barges had been moored for twenty years and more. There had been a caretaker, but I knew he wouldn't remain after night. To the Chinese, especially the humble ones, these old buildings which had seen so much history, which had known so many sorrows and heartaches of the royal ones, were a place of whispers, of queer echoes, and of wandering spirits.

The soldiers would be at the far end of the palace grounds and wouldn't hear a thing. I swam to the great doors which barred the boathouse, and drifted under them . . . and was inside the gloomy, huge building which to me will always be recalled as a mausoleum of dead hopes. Pigeons cooed under the eaves . . . and now and again feathers drifted down from the high ceiling to float on the water like tiny boats . . . and to travel out under the great doors, along the canal, to make some unknown port on the shores of Kun Ming.

I grasped the gunwale of one of the boats and crawled out, thence up to the concrete platform around the dock. There I stood, accustoming my eyes to the darkness, waiting. Under the eaves the pigeons cooed sleepily. One huge barge rocked lazily at anchor. Her timbers creaked and the sound was like protesting voices. Her roof was of yellow tile, for the barge was a floating palace. Oars were in place in the sternsheets. There were seats around the gunwales. On this boat had sat, in the long ago, the great ones of the court, to go forth to enjoy the breezes on Kun Ming.

The other boat . . . well, something had happened to it, across the lock from where I stood. It had sunk by the head and its deck was perpetually awash. The water came onto the green-scummed deck with little rushes of sound that were like whispers of endearment, or commiseration. The boat rocked as the first boat rocked. It too was roofed over in yellow tile. One boat, in the old days, had carried Her Majesty's retainers. The other had carried Her Majesty and her court ladies. I could fancy the beautiful picture they must have made. . . .

There had been scores of eunuchs garbed in gaudy gowns of great richness, created by the imperial tailors. There had been serving-maids no whit less gorgeously garbed. The ladies in waiting had worn gowns only less rich than Her Majesty . . . and Her Majesty's gown, with the dragon emblazoned in gold across its front, must have been a thing to marvel at. The symbol of the Empress was really a phenix, but Tzu Hsi affected the dragon, symbol of an Emperor, because she regarded herself as a man as far as rulership went.

Yes, it must have been a gorgeous spectacle. Now, all that remained was the shell; but this was summer. Years ago the court had been real at this time of the year, and the soldiers who now guarded the Summer Palace would not have dared even to look at it, and for a man to be caught inside the grounds as I was now, after nightfall, would have meant his flaying alive. The Emperor was the only man allowed in the palace . . . all other males being complete eunuchs.

Yes, it was all gone, but in fancy, perhaps I could bring them back.

I had done it before, in other places, because of my psychic propensities. At least I could delude myself . . . which was what I hoped to do. It was inexpressibly sad, inexpressibly weird, there in the old boathouse, with its high ceiling, the cooing of the invisible pigeons, the whispering of water over the decks of the barge that was partially awash, the creaking protest of both barges as they rubbed their sides against the concrete ways.

The top of one of the high doors had been broken off, as though it had been hit by a powerful explosive shell, and the broken splinters hung down inside, and through the opening came shafts of moonlight, to etch upon the black sullen water the shape of the holes in the boathouse. And the moonlight danced as the water danced. And there must have been things—dragons perhaps?—in the water; for many times, though I heard no wind, it was troubled. It made me think of the pilgrims who went down into Bethesda to bathe, when the waters were troubled . . . I don't know why. It was easy to conjure up pictures and parts of pictures in such surroundings.

I wished, so fervently it was almost a prayer, that the dead could return. . . .

And so suddenly as to frighten me there came a knocking at the door by which, during the day, I had entered. Had the soldiers, searching the grounds, found marks of water on the cobblestones to tell them an intruder was in the palace? Of course not. I hadn't touched land anywhere since leaving the Jade Girdle Bridge, until I crawled forth inside the boathouse . . . and nobody had entered it since I had.

The knocking was repeated.

Then sounded a harsh voice which still had in it a hint of melody.

"Open it quickly! Must we be kept waiting?"

I am quite sure that those were the words used, though I knew the language was mandarin, which I do not know. But somehow it didn't especially surprize me. If I were caught here it would mean death . . . and I wasn't ready for that. If I swam out now my swimming head would be seen in the moonlight; for from the noise outside—a noise which had in it a strange feeling of something distinctly Other—I knew that many people were waiting to be admitted.

So I slipped into the first barge as swiftly and as silently as I knew how, and hid myself in the shadows under the forward end, near the heavy blunt prow. When I sat down I found that, save for a view to the rear of the boat, the only other direction I could see was toward the barge which was awash. I looked there, casually . . . and my heart froze; for a strange thing was happening.

HAVE you ever watched the results of certain kinds of trick photography? Have you ever seen a large face fade into, gradually, a face that was smaller, so that the smaller face seemed, in the end, to be the result of several reductions in size of many other faces . . . each of which is seen for a moment, then seen in shadow while the smaller face appears, then the smaller, each face in its turn until the big face has become the small one? Fredric March in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* will illustrate. Only, this wasn't a matter of faces, as I stared at the boat which had sunk by the head.

First, there was the water line . . . and almost immediately afterward, as though it had happened while I blinked my eyes in unbelief, a wet dark streamer all around the part that had been under water . . . and the strip was fully a foot

wide. Even as I looked, the strip became wider . . . and the prow of the barge, which had been under water for twenty years, showed its ugly dragon head above the water.

Yes . . . the sunken barge, untouched by hands that I could see, was rising from the water which for so many years had been its grave! It was impossible, of course; yet I could see it so plainly. I watched it for a full minute, as the prow rose from the black sullen waters . . . like the dragon about which the guide had told me . . . and then my attention was diverted. The door in the side of the boathouse had suddenly banged open as though it had been crashed inward by a high wind. It banged open and crashed back against the wall.

And the voice I had heard spoke again.

"We shall use the other boat."

I darted a look across the ways, and rubbed my eyes, if not with my hands, at least mentally . . . for the boat that had been awash was now floating proudly. The paint of her yellow tiles was as clean as burnished gold where the moonlight touched it. Age had fallen from that barge as a cloak is dropped. I darted a glance at the boat in which I was hiding, to find that it too had been strangely renewed. This time I rubbed my eyes in earnest, but it caused no change.

Then I stared at the people who had entered. The leader was a woman, an imperious old woman. Her skin was fair, her carriage mannish and proud beyond all pride. She wore a dragon robe and her feet were set in Manchu shoes. She strode strongly around the concrete platforms toward the second barge. She was, I judged, almost seventy years of age; yet she traveled so swiftly that her followers had difficulty in keeping up with her. By her side walked a huge man with a beheading-knife in his hand . . . and I cringed as I thought of what use the thing might be put to. I was getting my wish with a vengeance, thus bringing back the shades of the past. Of course I knew that stage mummers could fit themselves into all sorts of rôles. I fully expected to see American tourists enter behind the strange cavalcade, to pay their money, and watch, and laugh over, the puppet show for which they had paid. Tourists had no sentiment and were not above causing such re-enactments for their own pleasure. The aura of heartache which shrouded this old place, the knowledge that it had known so much of sorrow and of tears, would not touch them. They were of the sort which sat in golden thrones of dead and gone monarchs and had themselves photographed holding a bottle of beer, with a leg thrown over an arm of the imperial chair.

But no tourists came in. Perhaps they would join the show later . . . and the rising of the barge from its watery grave had been a trick played on my eyes—never too good—by the eery moonlight which came through the cracks and crevices of the boathouse.

Following the elderly, proud old woman was a serving-maid of great beauty carrying in her hand . . . a water pipe of jade. After her came another maid carrying cosmetics on a silken cushion of yellow. After her came a man carrying a yellow stool . . . and he carried it with care . . . and he spoke, and his voice was high-pitched, almost womanish. It startled me, made me remember things I had heard. But of course many eunuchs still lived in Peking, some of them in straitened circumstances, and some of them would have taken part in this mummery for the money on which to live.

So there was nothing unnatural about it. Behind the eunuch came many others,

each carrying something, one a comb, one an ivory fan decorated with peacock feathers, one a screen, one a cushion upon which many ear-rings rested, like jewels in a case. There were many serving-maids, too, and each carried something, and each thing they carried was something which a high-born lady would have considered necessary to her toilet.

And there were many other ladies who carried nothing at all, and these were dressed only less gorgeously than the old one who led the strange procession. They entered the barge with her. The old one was assisted into the boat by two of the womanish men, who held her by the arms.

The old woman took her place on golden cushions swiftly placed for her near the center of the boat. Eunuchs and serving-maids so placed themselves that they could best serve her. Those remaining over when she was satisfied that everything had been done for her comfort, were ordered to step aboard the boat on which I was hiding. It semed strange, when they came and alined themselves on board, that nobody saw me; but that I quickly forgot.

Several eunuchs caught up the poles lying under the thwarts and, taking their stance on runways on either side of the barge, they pressed the poles against the bottom of the ways and pushed. Lines had been cast off and the barge began to move, that one holding the old lady going out first through the door.

I watched the opening of that door. It was held together, the two halves of it, by rusty chains. I couldn't help wondering by what means the doors were opened and swung back. The chains gave, came apart with rusty squeakings, and dropped, rattling, to hang in their rings on either half of the great door. And slowly, as the leading barge approached, the two halves swung back . . . and they screamed dismally as they swung. It was eery, but still there seemed a reasonable explanation for it all—if I could only find it—despite that I saw no hands fumbling with the chains, saw no one push back the doors.

The leading barge passed through. For a fleeting moment I thought I could see the marble boat directly through the barge and the people on its deck, but of course that was imagination. I distinctly heard the swish of water under the counters of the two barges, heard the swish of water disturbed by the poles, and the spat-spat of bare feet on the runways as the men who poled the barges did their work. Thousands of times I had heard this sound on China's waterways. It wasn't new or strange.

But what was strange was that nobody noticed me, though I was sure that I was in plain view of all; but since none seemed to mind my presence I refused to worry about it further. Besides, the man with the beheading-knife rode in the first barge.

I had looked at my watch when the boathouse door had first swung open to admit the strange procession. It had been five minutes after twelve, exactly, and I have always been finicky about having the right time.

The two barges moved down the canal to the rhythmic swaying of the men who poled them. From the first barge came light laughter and banter, and it wasn't strange that I understood what was said. The ladies in waiting up there were discussing certain allegorical plays which had recently been shown in the old theater in the Summer Palace. Others spoke of strange games of chance, strange dice games of which I had never heard. But I had read about them.

Now we came even with the many palaces which cover Ten Thousand Years

Hill, upon which the Summer Palace—its scores of buildings—was sprawled. And again I rubbed my eyes in amazement. For every building was ablaze with light. The Colonnade, that pride of Old Buddha, had been strung with electric light wires, and the bulbs were like glowing eyes all down the curving length of the colonnade.

And something else had happened: I knew the Summer Palace in the same state of disintegration as the Forbidden City, with grass and weeds growing out of the dust and dirt between the yellow tiles of the roofs. Now there were neither weeds nor grass nor dirt, and the yellow tiles were golden in the bright light of the moon. Certainly I had broken into the Summer Palace at an odd time; certainly tourists—whom I expected at any moment to appear, probably with bottles of beer in their hands, shouting and singing and waving to their paid mummers on the two barges—were spending a vast sum of money to make the old buildings live again. I felt that they were going too far, but even so I wished to see it all.

I would soon know whether it was mummery, or something else; for three men came down to the boat-landing across the canal from the marble boat, and between them they brought a struggling captive. He was a Chinese in padded gown, and his yellow face was a mask of terror. He did not once look upon the old woman in the first barge, but kept his eyes lowered. His legs were trembling so that his knees knocked together audibly.

"This man was captured inside the walls just now," said one of the man's captors, "and we have brought him to Lao Ye."

It seemed to me that "lao ye" meant old one, but while I was cudgeling my brains to remember, the old woman rose from her place in the first barge. She towered, regally, above all the others. Her black eyes almost shot flames of anger. She bade her boatmen tie up the barge to the wharf. She bade the boatmen on the barge in which I was hidden to do likewise.

Then she stepped forth, as did those with her, upon the land, the western portion of the Summer Palace. I remained aboard the barge and no one noticed me. The womanish men chattered with excitement and their voices were like the cawing of crows. The serving-maids shrieked. The ladies in waiting talked decorously, but with an undercurrent of excitement in their liquid tones.

Now it came to me that I had seen every detail of this before! Had I seen it in a dream? Heard it described? Read it somewhere? I didn't know, but I found myself anticipating. This, I decided, would happen next . . . and at the prescribed time it *did* happen. I found I could look ahead and see exactly what was to happen, and there was no surprize in it when the thing did come to pass. The woman the guards—and they, too, had womanish voices—called Lao Ye strode up to the prisoner.

"Have you anything to say to us?" she demanded.

The man all but collapsed. He would have sprawled at her feet but for the men who held him. Then he straightened, whereupon they forced him to his knees and made him perform the kowtow, that act of servility which went out of China with the Empire.

"Beat him with the bamboo!" said the old woman.

And there in the moonlight they stripped the man to his waist, and placed him on the ground on his stomach. A man stood on either side of him, and

now in their hands appeared long withes of bamboo.

"Give him fifty lashes," snapped the old one.

The man winced as the lashes, first one and then the other, were laid across his bare flesh. In a matter of seconds the skin had been broken and red blood flowed from the man to dye the cobblestones. And each successive blow struck exactly in the same place . . . it must have been horrible torture before the beating was ended.

They stood the man upon his feet. Still he did not look upon the old one.

"Have you anything to say to us?" demanded the old one again.

"Thy slave has erred and deserves the punishment," the man mumbled, his words filled with pain.

"Ah, then you admit your error?"

"Yes."

The woman turned to her executioner. At this point I decided that the mummery had gone far enough. I jumped from the barge. The man had been beaten. Even this a coolie might agree to do for money . . . but beheading . . . of course it wouldn't come to that.

"Stop!" I shouted. "This has gone far enough."

Nobody stopped me, noticed me, or even seemed to hear. The talking continued. The executioner walked forward. The man was forced to kneel; but of course they couldn't, *wouldn't,* go through with this. Coolie lives were cheap, but dollars would never buy the life of a human being, however lowly, if I could prevent. I ran to first one person, then the other.

"I shall help you," I cried to the prisoner, but he didn't even look up or show that he had heard.

"You must not do this thing," I said to the old woman.

She looked through me as though she heard nothing, and as though she did not see me, though I knew she could not help hearing and seeing. I plucked at the sleeve of this man and that woman, yet did not touch them at all, because they so easily evaded it. Their clothing was in my hands, yet eluded me . . . and sweat was breaking forth all over my body. I knew that something was grimly, horribly wrong, but what?

The lights in the palaces . . . the golden moonlight . . . and this tableau out of China's past . . . mummery, all of it; yet the whipping had been real, for the blood seeped forth from the man's clothing, making it red, almost black in the moonlight. I was gripped by a strange horror, and a fear which I could neither subdue nor understand.

Two of the men forced the prisoner to kneel. A third grabbed at his queue after he had knelt, and pulled, drawing the man's neck taut. I dashed at the executioner, grabbing at his hands as he raised the beheading-knife. He did not see, hear, or even feel me. The unearthliness of the whole thing was now being brought home to me. Was I laboring under a delusion? Was I under some hypnotic spell? God only knew, and my God was not China's God.

The executioner brushed me aside, or rather I stepped aside when I could do nothing with him, to keep the great gleaming knife from descending and cleaving me from crown to chin. But even so I hoped it wouldn't continue to the end it tended toward. But it did. The knife whistled as it flashed through the air. The blade touched the back of the doomed man's neck. The head dangled from the queue still held in the hand of the third man.

The beheaded one jumped and jerked on the cobblestones like a chicken with its

head cut off . . . while I sweated with horror and my eyes must have stood out from my head. The man with the head hurled it at the quivering corpse, as the old woman spoke again.

"Back to the barges! No cringing coward of a coolie will keep us from enjoying our voyage on Kun Ming."

I WAS in a daze as I got back aboard, still enjoying that seeming invisibility which prevented discovery.

Now I began to examine, to see what manner of people these were among whom I had fallen, and there was an atmosphere of grimness in them. All looked with fear and trembling at the old woman. She could do to any of them what she had done to the prisoner, their glances said. Who was she? Certainly this was no mummery, else where were those who had paid for the show?

I felt of the solid boards of the barge, as one pinches oneself to see if one dreams . . . and the boards, I am sure, were real. I extended a hand and touched the gown of a man who stood close enough to me that he might have stepped upon me. I wasn't sure of the gown, save that its texture was coarse . . . and that it was extremely cold, icy cold. It made me shiver just to touch it.

Out into Kun Ming we rode. Now two ladies in waiting were singing . . . and they sang of heartbreak and sorrow, of love, of laughter and of tears. The women, in their gaudy, brilliant gowns, were like gorgeous night-flowers blooming in the moon, opening at night to receive the caress of the cool breeze which blew across the breast of Kun Ming. The men poled the two crafts . . . and I heard their spat-spatting feet, and knew that all this was real. I trailed my hand in the water and held it up . . . and drops fell from my fingertips that were like pearls, or a girl's tears, shining in the faint moonlight. It was real, it *had* to be real . . . and yet . . .

I rode on the second of the two barges and it was like a dream. It wasn't a happy dream. I couldn't escape it. I couldn't jump out and swim to the spot whence I had stepped into Kun Ming at ten o'clock. I couldn't do anything but drift with the barges on Kun Ming . . . and so I settled myself to do just that.

I looked back at the Summer Palace, wondering why so many lights were lighted; why, despite all the light, I could not feel that the Summer Palace was occupied. They were lights in empty buildings, burning without reason or purpose. An eery feeling.

Lily pads were crushed under our keel, to rise after we had passed and flirt the drops of water from their tops. Fish broke water, shining, and went under again. I saw the snaky traces of eels near the surface.

At last, after circling Kun Ming, the old woman spoke:

"It is time to return."

Immediately the barges swung back, heading for the canal. I looked at my watch, then at the eastern sky. This strange procession had begun at five minutes past midnight. It was now less than an hour before dawn . . . and yet the Summer Palace still blazed with light.

We started back, and I was glad that the ride was almost ended. Now I watched things more closely. No sound was heard now, not even the spat-spatting of the feet of those who poled the barges. Everybody had fallen silent because the old woman was silent, sitting on the yellow stool, asleep, but with her black eyes wide open and staring.

We entered the canal . . . and for every foot we traveled after that my terror grew . . . for I looked back as we

approached the boathouse . . . to see the Summer Palace grow old before my eyes! The lights went out in all the buildings as we passed them. The buildings which had been burnished as though newly cleaned changed before my starting eyes. It was as though a scroll which had been unrolled in a twinkling—changing the Summer Palace from desolation to brilliance—were now being rolled up again, keeping pace with us as we entered and traversed the canal. For where the roofs had been clean and golden yellow, now there was dirt and dust between the tiles again, and weeds and grass grew in the dirt, and waved sadly in the night wind.

It was visible, this changing from new brilliance to old desolation. I saw it happen. Here was dirt and grass on rooftops. Just there, ahead of us as we traversed the canal, the roofs of the buildings were bright and golden . . . and then, at once, they were as old as the first part, dirty and covered with grass and weeds.

And the lights kept pace with us, too, extinguishing themselves by some strange necromancy as we advanced.

The barge of the old one entered the boathouse . . . and seemed to vanish.

Then we followed . . . and I rubbed my eyes when they became accustomed to the darkness . . . for the first barge . . . well, it had sunk by the head and its deck was awash!

As my barge moved into the ways it underwent a strange metamorphosis. A patch of shadow struck its prow . . . and a man who had been standing there was gone as though he had stepped into an impenetrable black cloud. The shadow moved toward me. It touched each, in turn, of the people on the barge . . . and each person in his or her turn, disappeared.

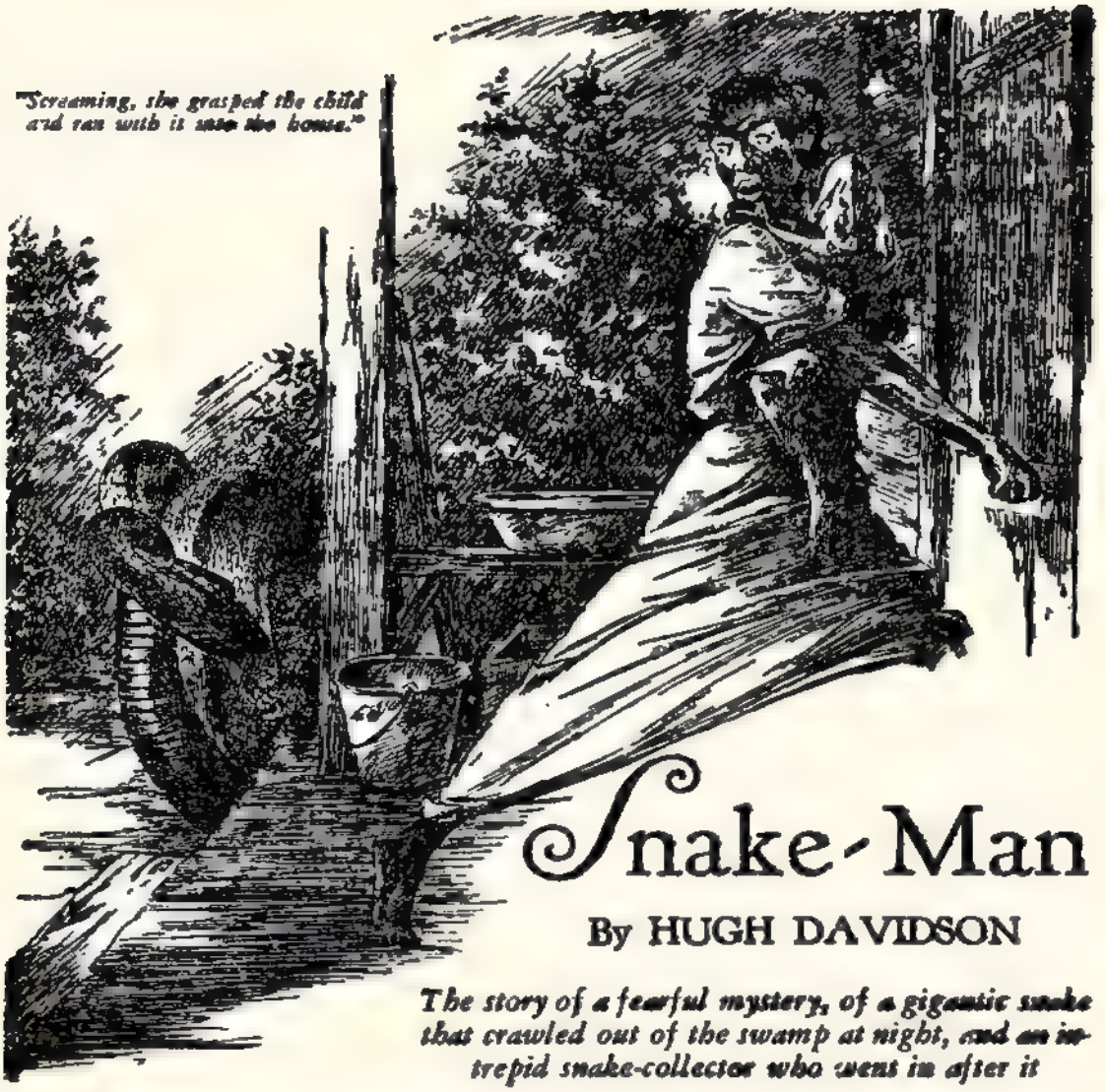
Then the shadow struck me . . . and it was icy cold . . . and I could see all the inside of the boathouse . . . and it was exactly as it had been when I first found it.

There were no voices, no sounds, save the sleepy cooing of the doves up high under the black ceiling. I shivered, numbed, trying to figure it all out. When I thought I knew I . . . no, I didn't swim back across the Kun Ming . . . I ran at top speed through the silent, deserted Summer Palace, found the gate which gave on the world and fled away.

A LONG time later there were the morning papers, in Peking.

I read one story with amazement, and a shivering of terror. It ran, in part, as follows:

"Captain Lung Yan, commanding the guard at the Imperial Tombs called Hsi Ling, heard an explosion. It snapped him awake. He ran toward the sound, looking at his watch, which gave the hour as five minutes after midnight. To his horror he discovered that ghouls had blasted open the tomb of Her Majesty, Tzu Hsi, rifled it . . . and had even broken open her coffin and taken out her remains . . . and those of members of her family buried with her . . . to search for precious stones said to have been buried with her. In this respect, quite aside from the horror of the vandalism, the writer recalls a peculiar fancy Her Majesty had during life. She believed that after she died she would still rule over the Middle Kingdom. Superstitious Chinese will await the pleasure of the gods in fear and trembling. . . ."



"Screaming, she grasped the child and ran with it into the house."

Snake-Man

By HUGH DAVIDSON

The story of a fearful mystery, of a gigantic snake that crawled out of the swamp at night, and an intrepid snake-collector who went in after it

I MET Hemmerick upon his first coming to Corala. Peter Winton and I were chatting that morning on the station platform, Peter bemoaning the general cussedness of the garage business and I wondering aloud why on earth I had ever thought this inland Florida village a good place for a young attorney to settle. The spur train that runs into Corala from the main line pulled in as we were talking, and Hemmerick was the only passenger to alight from it.

My first casual impression of him as he approached us, suitcases in his hands, was of a keen-looking middle-aged man with bright black eyes and a friendly face. He asked where he would find the village hotel and after a few more words introduced himself—Doctor John Hemmerick of Yates University and Eastern Zoological Museum. We took his cards and shook hands with him.

"This is Frank Rawlins, Corala's rising young lawyer," Peter told him, "and I'm the local representative of the automobile industry, known as Winton, Pete."

Hemmerick laughed. "I hope we'll be friends," he said, "for I'll be staying in

this district for some time. I've come to make some studies of this region's snake-life, in the Corala swamp."

"You've come to a good place, then," Peter said, "for if there's one thing that swamp has, it's snakes. You're going to stay here in the village? The swamp's about five miles west of here, you know."

"My idea was to locate somewhere at the swamp's edge if possible," Hemmerick answered. "It'd be much more convenient—most of my work in the swamp will have to be at night."

"You could stay in the old Drowl place at the north end of the swamp," I suggested. "That is, if you wouldn't mind roughing it."

"Yes, the Drowl house would be convenient," Peter agreed. "It's been abandoned for years and is in pretty bad shape, but it's right at the swamp's edge."

"That would suit me fine, then, for I'm used to discomfort on these trips," Hemmerick said. "How would I get out there?"

"There's a road runs almost to the place," Peter said. "But look here—why not let Rawlins and me drive you out this afternoon?"

"I couldn't think of bothering you," Hemmerick began, but we cut him short. "No bother at all," I told him. "We'll be around for you at two."

Hemmerick thanked us and promised to be ready, then found a negro boy to carry his luggage to the hotel and thus left us. That afternoon we called for him in Peter's roadster and drove out of Corala along the soft dirt road that leads in a wavering westward direction toward the swamp.

The country between the village and the swamp is only thinly inhabited, mostly by small farmers, white and black. There are marshy spots here and there and these become more frequent as one approaches the big swamp.

Hemmerick was not surprized when we told him that snakes, especially the big diamond-back rattlers, were the dread of the region. He had apparently pursued his studies and quest for specimens over much of the world, for he told anecdotes of snakes he had encountered in South America and Africa and Asia, hooded cobras and deadly mambas, coral snakes and fer-de-lances, giant pythons and boas and anacondas. Our conversation had certainly a snaky flavor as we drove toward the swamp.

THE road grew rapidly more marshy and soon we stopped the car and got out to go the rest of the way on foot. The dense green wall of the swamp stretched not far ahead, a tangled mass of scrub pine and palmetto and saw-grass, rising out of soft marsh and stagnant green pools and waterways. We were near the north end of the swamp, which is roughly oval in shape and almost twelve miles in length.

Hemmerick's eyes lit as he looked along it. "There'll be snakes here all right," he said. "It looks like a snake-paradise."

"I can't imagine any paradise with rattlers and moccasins in it," Peter said. "But this path leads to the Drowl place."

In single file, with Peter leading, we followed the overgrown and half-visible trail leading along the swamp's edge. The rank breath of the marsh was sickening in my nostrils, a heavy musky odor of decay. Hemmerick seemed to breathe it in with zest.

In minutes we came to the rotting frame house known as the Drowl place. It stood at the very edge, a clear space of slimy green mud sloping down from it into the swamp.

I could think of no place where I would less like to live, the more so after we entered the damp and decaying front room of the house in time to see a good-sized snake writhe down into a hole in the rotted floor. But that only seemed to make Hemmerick the more enthusiastic about the place.

"It'll be the most convenient place imaginable for me while I'm working in the swamp," he said. "I can bring out enough stuff from the village to make it livable for the time being."

"Strange are the ways of scientists," said Peter. "I wouldn't live in this cheerful spot for enough specimens to fill ten museums."

"Nor would I," I agreed. "I don't fancy sleeping where snakes crawl in with you to keep warm."

Hemmerick laughed. "Every one to his liking," he said. "Besides, what sleeping I do here will be mostly in daytime—most of my snake-catching I do at night, with a bright light to dazzle them."

We drove Hemmerick back into Corala and the next day he arranged to have some simple furnishings and supplies taken out to the Drowl house. Hemmerick followed to take up residence in the place on the day after that, thanking us for our trouble and promising to look in on us whenever he came into the village.

He did come in a few days later and when I met him he was enthusiastic about the swamp—already, he said, he had found some magnificent specimens and one or two odd variations of usual snake-species. The swamp's denseness made search in it somewhat difficult by night, but he was more than satisfied, he said.

In the ordinary course of events I would not have seen Hemmerick for some time, probably, after that, but an unusual event led Peter and me to make him a visit two days later. A negro named John Williams who had a small farm bordering on the swamp had come in to Corala with a snake story that had interested all listeners.

Williams was in a state of some excitement. His story was that a commotion among his small flock of goats down in his swamp-side corral had led him to investigate, before midnight on the preceding night. He had gone down to the corral and had seen in the moonlight the dark form of an incredibly large snake that had seized one of his young goats in its jaws and was gliding with it into the dark swamp.

He had, Williams said, watched the monster snake go in a sort of stupefaction, and only when it had vanished in the swamp did he think of his own peril and retreat hastily to the house. But with morning Williams had found the great snake's track in the soft mud to assure him what he had seen was no hallucination.

Williams' story led a number of men to go out from Corala that morning, Peter Winton among them, and they returned with assurance that there was certainly a snake-track of incredible size where Williams had said.

"Why, the snake that made that track must have been nearly a foot thick and heaven knows how long," Peter told me when we met that day at noon.

"Sounds impossible," I said. "No one ever heard of snakes that size around here, though one might have escaped from a circus or zoo."

"Wherever it came from originally, it came out of the swamp last night and went back in," he replied. "I'd hate to meet any snake that can take a goat like that."

A thought struck me. "Why not go out and tell Doctor Hemmerick about it?

He could probably tell from its track what it was, and anyway would be interested in it."

PETER accepted my suggestion and that afternoon we drove back out the swamp road to see Hemmerick. We left the car in the same place as before and went on along the swamp's edge to the old, decaying house.

We had to knock for some time before Hemmerick, yawning, came to the door. He explained he'd been busy in the swamp each night but wouldn't hear our apologies for waking him, and invited us inside.

The front room of the old house now held besides a few simple articles of furniture, a dozen wire cages in which were twenty or more living snakes of various kinds and sizes. I recognized some unusually large diamond-back rattlers, two fat brown water-moccasins, some harmless water-snakes and some green and white reptiles I couldn't identify. The room had a bitter, slimy odor of snake I found repellent.

Hemmerick looked around the cages with some pride. "These are some specimens I've been able to get already," he told us. "Got a good many of them near the house here, too, by night."

"It'd give me the creeps to have them in the same house with me," Peter said. "But Rawlins and I came out to tell you about a snake that tops all these."

Hemmerick heard our news with swift-mounting interest. "Why, I'm grateful to you for coming!" he exclaimed. "Of course I'll go over to look at the track—though I can't imagine what kind of snake native to these parts it could be."

"We could take you over," I suggested. "I want to see the thing's track myself—Peter was there this morning."

HEMMERICK locked his sagging door and came with us to the car. We drove along another wretchedly soft road parallel to the swamp's edge, toward its southern end.

We reached John Williams' little farm, an unpainted frame house surrounded by a score of cultivated acres that at their western border met the swamp's edge. Williams' wife told us her husband was down at the scene of the snake's appearance, and we three picked our way along the edge of a cornfield to the spot where we could glimpse Williams and two other negroes standing.

Williams was in earnest conversation with the other two, and I recognized one of them as Uncle Wally, a negro of some age who had a reputation among the blacks around Corala as a conjure man. He was pointing to the ground and saying something solemnly to Williams and the other.

They broke off their talk as they saw us approaching, and at Peter's request Williams showed us the track the snake had left. It was in the soft mud between Williams' little goat-corral and the swamp, leading up to the corral and then returning to the swamp. It was a groove in the mud some inches deep and a full foot across.

Hemmerick dropped to his knees and examined the track keenly. He looked up to us in a moment. "It's a snake track all right," he told us, "but who ever heard of a snake this size in this part of the world?"

"Sure was awful big," Willliams said, shaking his head. "Grabbed that goat and went off with it right before my eyes—couldn't hardly believe what I was seein'."

"Did it have any markings you could see?" Hemmerick asked him. "What did it look like?"

"Jus' looked like big dark snake, all I got to see of it," Williams answered. "Its eyes were red, though—eyes shone jus' like red fire."

Hemmerick looked back at the track. "Rawlins said maybe the snake's one escaped from a circus or zoo," Peter told him, but Hemmerick shook his head.

"Circuses don't carry big snakes, and there's no zoo within several hundred miles of here. Yet how in the name of all zoological science did a snake that size get into this swamp?"

Williams spoke hesitatingly. "Uncle Wally say it wasn't a real snake at all," he said. "He say it was a snake-man."

"A snake-man?" Peter repeated. "What in the world's that?"

"Hit's a snake dat's a man in daytime," Uncle Wally told him solemnly. "Nighttime comes, man uses devil-spell and turns into big snake. He crawl around all night as big snake, grab whatevah he sees, but daytime comes 'gain, spell change him back into man."

Hemmerick stood up. "I've heard that superstition before," he said interestedly. "When I was after mambas in Southern Africa I lived with tribes that believed utterly in snake-men. Their medicine-men told me lots about men who were men by day but whose compact with the forces of evil allowed them to take on snake form at night, and the spells by which it was done. I suppose the superstition here is a racial survival of that African one."

"Ain't no supahstition," Uncle Wally asserted. "Hit's a snake-man made dis track all right—some one round heah livin' a man in daytime, an' a big snake in dis swamp at night."

"For all we know it might be you, Uncle Wally," said Peter, grinning. "You're the only conjure man around here, and thus the only possible snake-man."

Hemmerick laughed and Uncle Wally looked strangely at him. "Mabbe you won't laugh at snake-man 'fore long," he told the scientist. "Mabbe you'll find out dat snake-man don't like man who captures snakes, an' dat snake-man'll come find dat man when he's snake at night."

"Well, snake-man or snake, I'd like to see the thing that made this track," Hemmerick said. "Maybe I'll meet it in the swamp some night—I hope so, at least."

We left the three negroes by the snake-track and went back to our car. As we drove Hemmerick back along the swamp road he was full of speculations about the snake's origin, and Peter and I were as puzzled and interested as he.

WE HEARD nothing more of the great snake, though, until three days later, when we learned that it had appeared again by night. This time it was one of the white farmers near the swamp's end, one Hannon, who had glimpsed the great creature.

Hannon's experience had been much like that of Williams. A squawking tumult in his chickenyard had roused him by night and he had stepped out just in time to see a monstrous black serpent-shape glide off to the swamp. Hannon had run back into the house for his gun, but when he got back out with it the snake was gone and five of his hens with it. Hannon swore, like Williams, that the snake's eyes had been fiery red in the glimpse he had had of it.

After Hannon's story none of us could doubt that a snake of extraordinary size haunted the swamp. There were many speculations as to how it had got there, and Hemmerick's statement that judging from its track the snake was of a kind unknown to him increased discussion. But

the negroes in and around Corala were unanimous in believing it a snake-man.

"Uncle Wally has the blacks so convinced there's a snake-man loose that it wouldn't take much to make them desert the county," Peter told me, chuckling.

"The old rascal's simply working up their superstitions for his own profit," I commented. "No doubt he's selling them charms against snake-men."

"They're looking up to Uncle Wally now, that's sure," Peter said. "They act in as much awe of him as if he were the snake-man himself."

"They'll get over it in a day or so. These superstitious scares of theirs don't usually last long."

I proved a poor prophet, for on the next day came news that not only intensified the terror of the negroes to an infinitely greater degree, but alarmed the section's white inhabitants also.

The great snake had appeared again at the farm of a negro named Cralley or Crallie, whose land was not far along the swamp's edge from that of Williams. The snake had come this time not long after nightfall, Cralley himself being in Corala with a load of produce but his wife and little boy at home.

Cralley had arrived home about ten to find the door barred and to hear his wife scream hysterically when he tried to open it. He had to smash down the door to get in and found her, with the child, in a state of terror approaching insanity. It had taken him most of the night to quiet her and find out what had happened.

The woman, with the little boy, had gone into a small pasture between the house and swamp not long after nightfall, to bring in a two-weeks-old calf that had been tied there. They had untied it and were returning, the boy proudly leading the little calf, when the woman had heard a strange rustling and turning around had seen the great snake writhing toward them from the swamp, its huge dark body moving with incredible speed and its terrible head slightly raised as it advanced.

Screaming, she had grasped the child and run with it to the house. The snake had pursued and she had slammed the door almost in its jaws, piling table and chairs against it. It had remained outside the house for a little time, gliding around as though seeking entrance, and she heard its rustling crawl.

Then the sound ceased as though the snake were gliding away, and a minute later came a soft, strangled cry from the calf. She had not dared look out, but there had been no more sound of the snake's presence. Yet she had been still too numbed with terror to admit Cralley when he arrived. Cralley had found the calf gone and the snake's track leading into the swamp.

WHEN Cralley came into Corala with this story, it aroused instant response. What had been before but a matter of interest was now one of alarm. The huge snake must be hunted down before some child fell prey to it. Ross Sanders, Corala's deputy sheriff, organized a party to penetrate the swamp in search of it.

As the only hope of finding the snake in the big swamp would be by following its track, Peter Winton suggested that in such trailing the help of the experienced Hemmerick would be invaluable. Sanders agreed, and Peter and I drove out to Hemmerick's place that afternoon, as the hunting-party was to start in the swamp on the next morning.

We found Hemmerick's rotting house silent, and while Peter knocked to rouse the scientist from his usual daytime slumber, I noticed in the stretch of mud between the house and the swamp some

tracks like those the great snake had left at Williams' place.

I was calling Peter's attention to them when Hemmerick came to the door. "You've noticed those tracks already?" he said. "I'm certain they're of the same big snake that was at Williams' place. I wish I'd been here when they were made—three days ago I came in from the swamp at dawn to find the tracks had been made there in the night. And the next morning when I came back there were more tracks—the big snake had been here again in the night!"

"Why in the devil should it come here?" Peter said. "There's nothing here for it to get—nothing but you, Hemmerick."

"Maybe Hemmerick's what it was after," I said, smiling. "Uncle Wally would say that the snake-man's coming here after Hemmerick in revenge for his capturing so many of the swamp's snakes."

"But if it came twice, whatever its reason, it might come again," Peter said. "Why not lie in wait here for it with guns?"

Hemmerick shook his head. "That I wouldn't allow," he said. "If that snake—any snake—were killed here, all snakes would avoid the place by their strange snake-instinct, which would make my work here hard."

"I suppose you're right," Peter said, "but we've got to get the creature some way. You haven't heard of its latest appearance."

Hemmerick was serious when he had heard of the great snake's dreadful appearance at Cralley's farm. "Why, that's terrible!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad you're going to hunt the thing down—I'll be glad to help, for I'm keen to find out what kind of snake it really is."

"Well, I'll be satisfied just to see the thing killed," I told him. "We're meeting at seven in the morning at Cralley's place—come in your swamp-clothes, of course."

The next morning saw some fifteen or sixteen of us assembled at Cralley's farm, Sanders heading our group. We were all in hip-boots and rough clothing and almost all of us had shotguns. Hemmerick appeared shortly after Peter and I arrived, and we all tramped down to the swamp's edge where the great snake's groove-trail was still clearly visible in the soft slime. Cralley was with us, and so was Williams.

We plunged into the swamp, and found the snake's track plain enough for a time in the mud and slime. But as we went on into the depths of the swamp, pools of green water lay more frequent in our path and the trail was much harder to follow. Hemmerick found it several times when none of the rest of us could do so.

HEMMERICK led the way, following the snake's trail in toward the center of the swamp. Though the sun blazed in the heavens, the light in the swamp was dim and pale, so dense the choked tangled vegetation. Hemmerick proved experienced enough in swamp-work, and more than once he pointed out quicksands we had not recognized as such.

By the afternoon we were well in toward the swamp's center. Peter and I were already well winded, but the trail was becoming ever harder to follow. Hemmerick scrutinized every inch of solid ground in search of it. Now and then we encountered snakes of various kinds, rattlesnakes and moccasins among them, some of unusually large size. But the great snake none had glimpsed.

At last even Hemmerick could follow the trail no farther. We stopped, knee-

deep in green water, a sweating, baffled group.

"Well, can't go no farther on this track," Sanders said. "One'd think the snake was taking care to hide its trail."

"Sure is the hardest I've ever followed," said Hemmerick. "The thing must have moved in the shallow water most of the time."

"We'll go back out to the Williams place and try following it in from there," Sanders decided. "It's an older trail there, but there's nothing to be gained hunting longer here."

We toiled out of the swamp and along its edge to Williams' farm, and started on the great snake's track there anew. This trail proved as hard to follow as the other, with the added handicap that in the several days that had elapsed since it had been made, rain had partly erased it.

Hemmerick again was the only one who could keep to the almost invisible trail. We plunged on after him, the rest of us having some difficulty at times in keeping up with the swamp-toughened scientist. We were heading in toward the center again, apparently, the light around us growing dimmer as the afternoon waned. At last, when the sun was setting and the swamp already darker, Hemmerick announced again that he could follow the trail no farther.

"It's too much for me," he said. "I've trailed far smaller snakes than this one through worse swamps, but they weren't so uncannily good in hiding their trail."

"Well, we've done what we can," Sanders said. "I guess we'll just have to give it up, and trust to the chance that some one will get the snake some time when it emerges from the swamp."

We tramped back out of the swamp for a second time, to Williams' place. Night had fallen by then and we found a knot of negroes in Williams' yard who seemed waiting for news of our hunt. Among these was Uncle Wally. When they heard of our failure Uncle Wally shook his head.

"Can't track down snake-man—snake-man know nuff to hide his trail, all right," he said. "Nobody round heah smart nuff to catch snake-man."

"I'm inclined to think he's right," Hemmerick told us. "It was the toughest trail I ever followed, and the worst of it is I've got more swamp-work to do tonight."

"Be careful in there," Sanders told him seriously. "I'd hate to be in that swamp alone, with that creature somewhere in it."

"That doesn't worry me," Hemmerick said, as he turned away, our party splitting up by then. "I've met snakes as big or bigger than this one by night and had no trouble with them."

As he swung off into the darkness, Peter shook his head. "Well, cursed if I'd hurry home simply to get into the swamp again. I had enough swamp today to last me for a long time."

"Swamp's a bad place when dere's snake-man round," Uncle Wally said. "Dat man think he know all 'bout snakes, but when snake-man meet him some night he know different."

Uncle Wally moved off into the darkness too, and we saw that most of our party had already gone, the negroes dispersing. Sanders and Peter and I bade Williams good-night and started toward the road leading back to Coraiz.

"Sure hate going back without a chance at that snake," Sanders said when we reached the road. "I won't feel easy, knowing it's still here in the swamp."

"There's a chance we might find it at Hemmerick's place," Peter told him. "It came there twice in the night and might come again." He told Sanders about the tracks we had seen at the Drowl house.

"But Hemmerick said he'd not allow any one to lay for it or try to kill it at his place, Peter," I reminded him. Peter shook his head impatiently.

"What if he did?—he'll be gone into the swamp by the time we get there and it's the best thing to get that creature killed even if it does hamper Hemmerick's work by making snakes avoid the place."

Sanders thought, and then nodded. "It's worth trying," he said. "Hemmerick won't be there, and we can go before he comes back if the snake doesn't show up."

So instead of heading toward Corala we went along the swamp-road toward the north end. The moon had not yet risen and the swamp's dark wall was hardly distinguishable in the darkness beside us. Its rank odors seemed heavier at night than by day.

We came finally toward the old Drowl house. As we had expected, there was no spark of light from it, Hemmerick having already entered the swamp on his usual nightly quest for specimens. The place was very silent, its odor of rotting wood mingling with the swamp's breath.

"All well," Sanders said. "Door's not locked, either—we can go right in."

"Be careful where you step," Peter warned him as he opened the door. "Hemmerick has some dozen cages of snakes in here."

We stepped up into the dark front room. The snaky odor was strong in the darkness and we heard from all about us a hissing and rustling that was blood-chilling.

Sanders struck a match and the flame showed us the room as Peter and I had seen it before, with Hemmerick's collection of snakes all about us in their wire cages. Their unwinking eyes stared beadily at us in the light, some of them coiled and watching us with upraised heads.

"Nice place," grunted Sanders. "Move those cages away from the window at the swamp side, Peter—we can open it and watch the edge of the swamp from there."

While he lit matches, Peter and I shifted the cages with our gun-barrels to make a clear space by the window. We opened the window and drew up three of Hemmerick's camp-chairs to it.

In the darkness again as Sanders' matches went out, we could sit in the chairs and with gun-barrels resting on the edge of the open window could look down on the slope of slimy mud that lay beneath, between the house and the dark swamp. The moon was rising now, showing this muddy space clearly.

"This'll do," Sanders said. "If the snake comes out of the swamp again for whatever brought it before, we'll see and can let it have it."

"We'd better do it or leave before Hemmerick gets back," I warned, "for he'll be pretty angry to find us here."

"Hemmerick will probably be in the swamp until morning," Peter answered. "It's not midnight yet."

After that we were silent, waiting.

It was a strange wait, there in the darkness of the rotting house, watching the dark swamp and the stretch of moonlit mud that lay between house and swamp. The only sounds, save when Sanders or Peter shifted restlessly, were the occasional rustling of the snakes in the cages about us. It was a spine-thrilling sound to us, sitting in darkness.

Time passed silently, slowly, as we waited, the moon swinging higher. I felt my confidence in Peter's plan on the wane. Why should the great snake approach Hemmerick's house again? Why

had it come before, even? Uncle Wally had said it was the snake-man coming to revenge on Hemmerick the swamp's snakes he had captured, an explanation I smiled to remember. Yet I was puzzled as to what attraction drew the great snake to Hemmerick's house.

I pictured Hemmerick out in the dark swamp, searching for his specimens with patient obliviousness to discomfort and danger. There was no movement in the swamp that I could see or hear, nor on the slimy shore beneath. Hours had passed. The moon had swung into the western quarter of the sky.

Peter spoke, his voice low. "If our snake doesn't show up before long we'll have no chance at him," he said. "Hemmerick will be back soon—it's near morning."

"We'll wait a while longer," Sanders answered, "though I don't want Hemmerick to find us here when he gets back."

We were silent again, watching, waiting. The occasional rustle of the reptiles in the cages was still the only sound. Time passed, and an almost imperceptible dulling of the moonlight showed that night would soon be over.

We still stared out. There moved nothing in the dark swamp—but suddenly now there did move something! It was a dark shadow of something, advancing out of the swamp in soundless, gliding movement.

I KNEW as Sanders and Peter straightened beside me that they too had seen. Our fingers were on our triggers as we raised our guns. And out of the swamp onto the moonlit mud between it and the house there writhed a huge dark snake-shape, gliding up toward the house with great snake-body and hideous head and red eyes clear in the moonlight. The next instant we pressed on our triggers.

The shattering roar of our guns split the night and we saw the great dark snake-body below coiling and flexing wildly, convulsively, then contracting and lying still. I cried out excitedly, and we leapt out through the window and down to that dark mass.

We bent over it and then there came a choking cry from Sanders, another from Peter. It was no snake-body that lay huddled there now but the body of a man, his rough dark clothing torn by our shots! He lay with body contracted terribly, and his face that showed pale and set in the moonlight was the face of Doctor John Hemmerick!

"Hemmerick! Hemmerick! God, and a moment ago he was the great snake!" cried Peter. "A snake-man—and we didn't believe!"

My brain seemed cracking. "Hemmerick the snake-man—the great snake! He told us he learned about snake-men in Africa, remember! He told us he'd learned the spells of the snake-men—and it was he in the swamp at night——" My voice choked into a whisper.

"Listen to me, you two!" Sanders, swaying himself, had gripped our arms. "Hemmerick was no snake-man—there's no such thing as a snake-man—we killed Hemmerick by accident, do you understand? By accident!"

His voice broke. "My God, they'd hold us all insane if we told. Hemmerick was shot by accident, do you hear?"

"We understand—Hemmerick was shot accidentally, and there's no such thing as a snake-man," Peter managed to answer. "But when Hemmerick died the great snake died, and only we three will ever know that they died—together."

"Then a hideous thing came to pass, for the headless body reared up from the sand and staggered away in awful flight."

The Scarlet Citadel

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A shuddery story of weird monstrosities in the underground crypts of Tsotha-lanti the magician—a tale of eery powers and red battle

I

They trapped the Lion on Shamu's plain;
They weighted his limbs with an iron chain;
They cried aloud in the trumpet-blast,
They cried, "The Lion is caged at last!"
Wo to the cities of river and plain
If ever the Lion stalks again!

—Old Ballad.

THE roar of battle had died away; the shout of victory mingled with the cries of the dying. Like gay-hued leaves after an autumn storm, the fallen littered the plain; the sinking sun shimmered on burnished helmets, gilt-worked mail, silver breastplates, broken swords, and the heavy regal folds of silken standards, overthrown in pools of curdling crimson. In silent heaps lay warhorses and their steel-clad riders, flowing manes and blowing plumes stained alike in the red tide. About them and among them, like the drift of a storm, were strewn slashed and trampled bodies in steel caps and leather jerkins—archers and pikemen.

The oliphants sounded a fanfare of triumph all over the plain, and the hoofs of the victors crunched in the breasts of the vanquished as all the straggling, shin-

ing lines converged inward like the spokes of a glittering wheel, to the spot where the last survivor still waged unequal strife.

That day Conan, king of Aquilonia, had seen the pick of his chivalry cut to pieces, smashed and hammered to bits, and swept into eternity. With five thousand knights he had crossed the southeastern border of Aquilonia and ridden into the grassy meadowlands of Ophir, to find his former ally, King Amalrus of Ophir, drawn up against him with the hosts of Strabonus, king of Koth. Too late he had seen the trap. All that a man might do he had done with his five thousand cavalrymen against the thirty thousand knights, archers and spearmen of the conspirators.

Without bowmen or infantry, he had hurled his armored horsemen against the oncoming host, had seen the knights of his foes in their shining mail go down before his lances, had torn the opposing center to bits, driving the riven ranks headlong before him, only to find himself caught in a vise as the untouched wings closed in. Strabonus' Shemitish bowmen had wrought havoc among his knights, feathering them with shafts that found every crevice in their armor, shooting down the horses, the Kothian pikemen rushing in to spear the fallen riders. The mailed lancers of the routed center had re-formed, reinforced by the riders from the wings, and had charged again and again, sweeping the field by sheer weight of numbers.

The Aquilonians had not fled; they had died on the field, and of the five thousand knights who had followed Conan southward, not one left the plain of Shamu alive. And now the king himself stood at bay among the slashed bodies of his house-troops, his back against a heap of dead horses and men. Ophirean knights in gilded mail leaped their horses over mounds of corpses to slash at the solitary figure; squat Shemites with blue-black beards, and dark-faced Kothian knights ringed him on foot. The clangor of steel rose deafeningly; the black-mailed figure of the western king loomed among his swarming foes, dealing blows like a butcher wielding a great cleaver. Riderless horses raced down the field; about his iron-clad feet grew a ring of mangled corpses. His attackers drew back from his desperate savagery, panting and livid.

Now through the yelling, cursing lines rode the lords of the conquerors—Strabonus, with his broad dark face and crafty eyes; Amalrus, slender, fastidious, treacherous, dangerous as a cobra; and the lean vulture Tsotha-lanti, clad only in silken robes, his great black eyes glittering from a face that was like that of a bird of prey. Of this Kothian wizard dark tales were told; tousle-headed women in northern and western villages frightened children with his name, and rebellious slaves were brought to abased submission quicker than by the lash, with the threat of being sold to him. Men said that he had a whole library of dark works bound in skin flayed from living human victims, and that in nameless pits below the hill whereon his palace sat, he trafficked with the powers of darkness, trading screaming girl slaves for unholy secrets. He was the real ruler of Koth.

Now he grinned bleakly as the kings reined back a safe distance from the grim iron-clad figure looming among the dead. Before the savage blue eyes blazing murderously from beneath the crested, dented helmet, the boldest shrank. Conan's dark scarred face was darker yet with passion; his black armor was hacked to tatters and splashed with blood; his great sword red to the cross-piece. In this stress all the

veneer of civilization had faded; it was a barbarian who faced his conquerors. Conan was a Cimmerian by birth, one of those fierce moody hillmen who dwelt in their gloomy, cloudy land in the north. His saga, which had led him to the throne of Aquilonia, was the basis of a whole cycle of hero-tales.

SO NOW the kings kept their distance, and Strabonus called on his Shemitish archers to loose their arrows at his foe from a distance; his captains had fallen like ripe grain before the Cimmerian's broadsword, and Strabonus, penurious of his knights as of his coins, was frothing with fury. But Tsotha shook his head.

"Take him alive."

"Easy to say!" snarled Strabonus, uneasy lest in some way the black-mailed giant might hew a path to them through the spears. "Who can take a man-eating tiger alive? By Ishtar, his heel is on the necks of my finest swordsmen! It took seven years and stacks of gold to train each, and there they lie, so much kite's meat. Arrows, I say!"

"Again, nay!" snapped Tsotha, swinging down from his horse. He laughed coldly. "Have you not learned by this time that my brain is mightier then any sword?"

He passed through the lines of the pikemen, and the giants in their steel caps and mail brigandines shrank back fearfully, lest they so much as touch the skirts of his robe. Nor were the plumed knights slower in making room for him. He stepped over the corpses and came face to face with the grim king. The hosts watched in tense silence, holding their breath. The black-armored figure loomed in terrible menace over the lean, silk-robed shape, the notched, dripping sword hovering on high.

"I offer you life, Conan," said Tsotha, a cruel mirth bubbling at the back of his voice.

"I give you death, wizard," snarled the king, and backed by iron muscles and ferocious hate the great sword swung in a stroke meant to shear Tsotha's lean torso in half. But even as the hosts cried out, the wizard stepped in, too quick for the eye to follow, and apparently merely laid an open hand on Conan's left forearm, from the rigid muscles of which the mail had been hacked away. The whistling blade veered from its arc and the mailed giant crashed heavily to earth, to lie motionless. Tsotha laughed silently.

"Take him up and fear not; the lion's fangs are drawn."

The kings reined in and gazed in awe at the fallen lion. Conan lay stiffly, like a dead man, but his eyes glared up at them, wide open, and blazing with helpless fury.

"What have you done to him?" asked Amalrus uneasily.

Tsotha displayed a broad ring of curious design on his finger. He pressed his fingers together and on the inner side of the ring a tiny steel fang darted out like a snake's tongue.

"It is steeped in the juice of the purple lotus which grows in the ghost-haunted swamps of southern Stygia," said the magician. "Its touch produces temporary paralysis. Put him in chains and lay him in a chariot. The sun sets and it is time we were on the road for Khorshemish."

Strabonus turned to his general Arbanus.

"We return to Khorshemish with the wounded. Only a troop of the royal cavalry will accompany us. Your orders are to march at dawn to the Aquilonian border, and invest the city of Shamar. The Ophireans will supply you with food along the march. We will rejoin you as soon as possible, with reinforcements."

So the host, with its steel-sheathed knights, its pikemen and archers and camp-servants, went into camp in the meadowlands near the battlefield. And through the starry night the two kings and the sorcerer who was greater than any king rode to the capital of Strabonus, in the midst of the glittering palace troop, and accompanied by a long line of chariots, loaded with the wounded. In one of these chariots lay Conan, king of Aquilonia, weighted with chains, the tang of defeat in his mouth, the blind fury of a trapped tiger in his soul.

The poison which had frozen his mighty limbs to helplessness had not paralyzed his brain. As the chariot in which he lay rumbled over the meadowlands, his mind revolved maddeningly about his defeat. Amalrus had sent an emissary imploring aid against Strabonus, who, he said, was ravaging his western domain, which lay like a tapering wedge between the border of Aquilonia and the vast southern kingdom of Koth. He asked only a thousand horsemen and the presence of Conan, to hearten his demoralized subjects. Conan now blasphemed mentally. In his generosity he had come with five times the number the treacherous monarch had asked. In good faith he had ridden into Ophir, and had been confronted by the supposed rivals allied against him. It spoke significantly of his prowess that they had brought up a whole host to trap him and his five thousand.

A red cloud veiled his vision; his veins swelled with fury and in his temples a pulse throbbed maddeningly. In all his life he had never known greater and more helpless wrath. In swift-moving scenes the pageant of his life passed jeeringly before his mental eye—a panorama wherein moved shadowy figures which were himself, in many guises and conditions—a skin-clad barbarian; a mercenary swordsman in horned helmet and scale-mail corselet; a corsair in a dragon-prowed galley that trailed a crimson wake of blood and pillage along southern coasts; a captain of hosts in burnished steel, on a rearing black charger; a king on a golden throne with the lion banner flowing above, and throngs of gay-hued courtiers and ladies on their knees. But always the jouncing and rumbling of the chariot brought his thoughts back to revolve with maddening monotony about the treachery of Amalrus and the sorcery of Tsotha. The veins nearly burst in his temples and the cries of the wounded in the chariots filled him with ferocious satisfaction.

BEFORE midnight they crossed the Ophirean border and at dawn the spires of Khorshemish stood up gleaming and rose-tinted on the southeastern horizon, the slim towers overawed by the grim scarlet citadel that at a distance was like a splash of bright blood in the sky. That was the castle of Tsotha. Only one narrow street, paved with marble and guarded by heavy iron gates, led up to it, where it crowned the hill dominating the city. The sides of that hill were too sheer to be climbed elsewhere. From the walls of the citadel one could look down on the broad white streets of the city, on minaretted mosques, shops, temples, mansions, and markets. One could look down, too, on the palaces of the king, set in broad gardens, high-walled, luxurious riots of fruit trees and blossoms, through which artificial streams murmured, and silvery fountains rippled incessantly. Over all brooded the citadel, like a condor stooping above its prey, intent on its own dark meditations.

The mighty gates between the huge towers of the outer wall clanged open, and the king rode into his capital be-

tween lines of glittering spearmen, while fifty trumpets pealed salute. But no throngs swarmed the white-paved streets to fling roses before the conqueror's hoofs. Strabonus had raced ahead of news of the battle, and the people, just rousing to the occupations of the day, gaped to see their king returning with a small retinue, and were in doubt as to whether it portended victory or defeat.

Conan, life sluggishly moving in his veins again, craned his neck from the chariot floor to view the wonders of this city which men called the Queen of the South. He had thought to ride some day through these golden-chased gates at the head of his steel-clad squadrons, with the great lion banner flowing over his helmeted head. Instead he entered in chains, stripped of his armor, and thrown like a captive slave on the bronze floor of his conqueror's chariot. A wayward devilish mirth of mockery rose above his fury, but to the nervous soldiers who drove the chariot his laughter sounded like the muttering of a rousing lion.

2

Gleaming shell of an outworn lie; fable of Right divine—
You gained your crowns by heritage, but Blood was the price of mine.
The throne that I won by blood and sweat, by Crom, I will not sell
For promise of valleys filled with gold, or threat of the Halls of Hell!
—The Road of Kings.

IN THE citadel, in a chamber with a domed ceiling of carven jet, and the fretted arches of doorways glimmering with strange dark jewels, a strange conclave came to pass. Conan of Aquilonia, blood from unbandaged wounds caking his huge limbs, faced his captors. On either side of him stood a dozen black giants, grasping their long-shafted axes. In front of him stood Tsotha, and on divans lounged Strabonus and Amalrus in their silks and gold, gleaming with jewels, naked slave-boys beside them pouring wine into cups carved of a single sapphire. In strong contrast stood Conan, grim, blood-stained, naked but for a loincloth, shackles on his mighty limbs, his blue eyes blazing beneath the tangled black mane that fell over his low broad forehead. He dominated the scene, turning to tinsel the pomp of the conquerors by the sheer vitality of his elemental personality, and the kings in their pride and splendor were aware of it each in his secret heart, and were not at ease. Only Tsotha was not disturbed.

"Our desires are quickly spoken, king of Aquilonia," said Tsotha. "It is our wish to extend our empire."

"And so you want to swine my kingdom," rasped Conan.

"What are you but an adventurer, seizing a crown to which you had no more claim than any other wandering barbarian?" parried Amalrus. "We are prepared to offer you suitable compensation——"

"Compensation?" It was a gust of deep laughter from Conan's mighty chest. "The price of infamy and treachery! I am a barbarian, so I shall sell my kingdom and its people for life and your filthy gold? Ha! How did you come to your crown, you and that black-faced pig beside you? Your fathers did the fighting and the suffering, and handed their crowns to you on golden platters. What you inherited without lifting a finger—except to poison a few brothers—I fought for.

"You sit on satin and guzzle wine the people sweat for, and talk of divine rights of sovereignty—bah! I climbed out of the abyss of naked barbarism to the throne and in that climb I spilt my blood as freely as I spilt that of others. If either of us

has the right to rule men, by Crom, it is I! How have you proved yourself my superior?

"I found Aquilonia in the grip of a pig like you—one who traced his genealogy for a thousand years. The land was torn with the wars of the barons, and the people cried out under suppression and taxation. Today no Aquilonian noble dares maltreat the humblest of my subjects, and the taxes of the people are lighter than anywhere else in the world.

"What of you? Your brother, Amalrus, holds the eastern half of your kingdom and defies you. And you, Strabonus, your soldiers are even now besieging castles of a dozen or more rebellious barons. The people of both your kingdoms are crushed into the earth by tyrannous taxes and levies. And you would loot mine—ha! Free my hands and I'll varnish this floor with your brains!"

Tsotha grinned bleakly to see the rage of his kingly companions.

"All this, truthful though it be, is beside the point. Our plans are no concern of yours. Your responsibility is at an end when you sign this parchment, which is an abdication in favor of Prince Arpello of Pellia. We will give you arms and horse, and five thousand golden lunas, and escort you to the eastern frontier."

"Setting me adrift where I was when I rode into Aquilonia to take service in her armies, except with the added burden of a traitor's name!" Conan's laugh was like the deep short bark of a timber wolf. "Arpello, eh? I've had suspicions of that butcher of Pellia. Can you not even steal and pillage frankly and honestly, but you must have an excuse, however thin? Arpello claims a trace of royal blood; so you use him as an excuse for theft, and a satrap to rule through! I'll see you in hell first."

"You're a fool!" exclaimed Amalrus. "You are in our hands, and we can take both crown and life at our pleasure!"

Conan's answer was neither kingly nor dignified, but characteristically instinctive in the man, whose barbaric nature had never been submerged in his adopted culture. He spat full in Amalrus' eyes. The king of Ophir leaped up with a scream of outraged fury, groping for his slender sword. Drawing it, he rushed at the Cimmerian, but Tsotha intervened.

"Wait, your majesty; this man is *my* prisoner."

"Aside, wizard!" shrieked Amalrus, maddened by the glare in the Cimmerian's blue eyes.

"Back, I say!" roared Tsotha, roused to awesome wrath. His lean hand came from his sleeve and cast a shower of dust into the Ophirean's contorted face. Amalrus cried out and staggered back, clutching at his eyes, the sword falling from his hand. He dropped limply on the divan, while the Kothian guards looked on stolidly and King Strabonus hurriedly gulped another goblet of wine, holding it with hands that trembled. Amalrus lowered his hands and shook his head violently, intelligence slowly sifting back into his gray eyes.

"I went blind," he growled. "What did you do to me, wizard?"

"Merely a gesture to convince you who was the real master," snapped Tsotha, the mask of his formal pretense dropped, revealing the naked evil personality of the man. "Strabonus has learned his lesson—let you learn yours. It was but a dust I found in a Stygian tomb which I flung into your eyes—if I brush out their sight again, I will leave you to grope in darkness for the rest of your life."

Amalrus shrugged his shoulders, smiled whimsically and reached for a goblet, dissembling his fear and fury. A polished diplomat, he was quick to re-

gain his poise. Tsotha turned to Conan, who had stood imperturbably during the episode. At the wizard's gesture, the blacks laid hold of their prisoner and marched him behind Tsotha, who led the way out of the chamber through an arched doorway into a winding corridor, whose floor was of many-hued mosaics, whose walls were inlaid with gold tissue and silver chasing, and from whose fretted arched ceiling swung golden censers, filling the corridor with dreamy perfumed clouds. They turned down a smaller corridor, done in jet and black jade, gloomy and awful, which ended at a brass door, over whose arch a human skull grinned horrifically. At this door stood a fat repellent figure, dangling a bunch of keys —Tsotha's chief eunuch, Shukeli, of whom grisly tales were whispered—a man with whom a bestial lust for torture took the place of normal human passions.

THE brass door let onto a narrow stair that seemed to wind down into the very bowels of the hill on which the citadel stood. Down these stairs went the band, to halt at last at an iron door, the strength of which seemed unnecessary. Evidently it did not open on outer air, yet it was built as if to withstand the battering of mangonels and rams. Shukeli opened it, and as he swung back the ponderous portal, Conan noted the evident uneasiness among the black giants who guarded him; nor did Shukeli seem altogether devoid of nervousness as he peered into the darkness beyond. Inside the great door there was a second barrier, composed of great steel bars. It was fastened by an ingenious bolt which had no lock and could be worked only from the outside; this bolt shot back, the grille slid into the wall. They passed through, into a broad corridor, the floor, walls and arched ceiling of which seemed to be cut out of solid stone. Conan knew he was far underground, even below the hill itself. The darkness pressed in on the guardsmen's torches like a sentient, animate thing.

They made the king fast to a ring in the stone wall. Above his head in a niche in the wall they placed a torch, so that he stood in a dim semicircle of light. The blacks were anxious to be gone; they muttered among themselves, and cast fearful glances at the darkness. Tsotha motioned them out, and they filed through the door in stumbling haste, as if fearing the darkness might take tangible form and spring upon their backs. Tsotha turned toward Conan, and the king noticed uneasily that the wizard's eyes shone in the semi-darkness, and that his teeth much resembled the fangs of a wolf, gleaming whitely in the shadows.

"And so, farewell, barbarian," mocked the sorcerer. "I must ride to Shamar, and the siege. In ten days I will be in your palace in Tamar, with my warriors. What word from you shall I say to your women, before I flay their dainty skins for scrolls whereon to chronicle the triumphs of Tsotha-lanti?"

Conan answered with a searing Cimmerian curse that would have burst the very eardrums of an ordinary man, and Tsotha laughed thinly and withdrew. Conan had a glimpse of his vulture-like figure through the thick-set bars, as he slid home the grate; then the heavy outer door clanged, and silence fell like a pall.

3

The Lion strode through the halls of Hell;
Across his path grim shadows fell
Of many a mowing, nameless shape—
Monsters with dripping jaws agape.
The darkness shuddered with scream and yell
When the Lion stalked through the halls of Hell.

—Old Ballad.

KING CONAN tested the ring in the wall and the chain that bound him. His limbs were free, but he knew that his shackles were beyond even his iron strength. The links of the chain were as thick as his thumb and were fastened to a band of steel about his waist, a band broad as his hand and half an inch thick. The sheer weight of his shackles would have slain a lesser man with exhaustion. The locks that held band and chain were massive affairs that a sledge-hammer could hardly have dinted. As for the ring, evidently it went clear through the wall and was clinched on the other side.

Conan cursed and panic surged through him as he glared into the darkness that pressed against the half-circle of light. All the superstitious dread of the barbarian slept in his soul, untouched by civilized logic. His primitive imagination peopled the subterranean darkness with grisly shapes. Besides, his reason told him that he had not been placed there merely for confinement. His captors had no reason to spare him. He had been placed in these pits for a definite doom. He cursed himself for his refusal of their offer, even while his stubborn manhood revolted at the thought, and he knew that were he taken forth and given another chance, his reply would be the same. He would not sell his subjects to the butcher. And yet it had been with no thought of any one's gain but his own that he had seized the kingdom originally. Thus subtly does the instinct of sovereign responsibility enter even a red-handed plunderer sometimes.

Conan thought of Tsotha's last abominable threat, and groaned in sick fury, knowing it was no idle boast. Men and women were to the wizard no more than the writhing insect is to the scientist. Soft white hands that had caressed him, red lips that had been pressed to his, dainty white bosoms that had quivered to his hot fierce kisses, to be stripped of their delicate skin, white as ivory and pink as young petals—from Conan's lips burst a yell so frightful and inhuman in its mad fury that a listener would have stared in horror to know that it came from a human throat.

The shuddering echoes made him start and brought back his own situation vividly to the king. He glared fearsomely at the outer gloom, and thought of all the grisly tales he had heard of Tsotha's necromantic cruelty, and it was with an icy sensation down his spine that he realized that these must be the very Halls of Horror named in shuddering legendry, the tunnels and dungeons wherein Tsotha performed horrible experiments with beings human, bestial, and, it was whispered, demoniac, tampering blasphemously with the naked basic elements of life itself. Rumor said that the mad poet Rinaldo had visited these pits, and been shown horrors by the wizard, and that the nameless monstrosities of which he hinted in his awful poem, *The Song of the Pit*, were no mere fantasies of a disordered brain. That brain had crashed to dust beneath Conan's battle-ax on the night the king had fought for his life with the assassins the mad rimer had led into the betrayed palace, but the shuddersome words of that grisly song still rang in the king's ears as he stood there in his chains.

Even with the thought the Cimmerian was frozen by a soft rustling sound, blood-freezing in its implication. He tensed in an attitude of listening, painful in its intensity. An icy hand stroked his spine. It was the unmistakable sound of pliant scales slithering softly over stone. Cold sweat beaded his skin, as beyond the ring of dim light he saw a vague and colossal form, awful even in its indistinctness. It reared upright, swaying slightly, and yel-

low eyes burned icily on him from the shadows. Slowly a huge, hideous, wedge-shaped head took form before his dilated eyes, and from the darkness oozed, in flowing scaly coils, the ultimate horror of reptilian development.

It was a snake that dwarfed all Conan's previous ideas of snakes. Eighty feet it stretched from its pointed tail to its triangular head, which was bigger than that of a horse. In the dim light its scales glistened coldly, white as hoar-frost. Surely this reptile was one born and grown in darkness, yet its eyes were full of evil and sure sight. It looped its titan coils in front of the captive, and the great head on the arching neck swayed a matter of inches from his face. Its forked tongue almost brushed his lips as it darted in and out, and its fetid odor made his senses reel with nausea. The great yellow eyes burned into his, and Conan gave back the glare of a trapped wolf. He fought frenziedly against the mad impulse to grasp the great arching neck in his tearing hands. Strong beyond the comprehension of civilized man, he had broken the neck of a python in a fiendish battle on the Stygian coast, in his corsair days. But this reptile was venomous; he saw the great fangs, a foot long, curved like simitars. From them dripped a colorless liquid that he instinctively knew was death. He might conceivably crush that wedge-shaped skull with a desperate clenched fist, but he knew that at his first hint of movement, the monster would strike like lightning.

It was not because of any logical reasoning process that Conan remained motionless, since reason might have told him—since he was doomed anyway—to goad the snake into striking and get it over with; it was the blind black instinct of self-preservation that held him rigid as a statue blasted out of iron. Now the great barrel reared up and the head was poised high above his own, as the monster investigated the torch. A drop of venom fell on his naked thigh, and the feel of it was like a white-hot dagger driven into his flesh. Red jets of agony shot through Conan's brain, yet he held himself immovable; not by the twitching of a muscle or the flicker of an eyelash did he betray the pain of the hurt that left a scar he bore to the day of his death.

The serpent swayed above him, as if seeking to ascertain whether there were in truth life in this figure which stood so death-like still. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the outer door, all but invisible in the shadows, clanged stridently. The serpent, suspicious as all its kind, whipped about with a quickness incredible for its bulk, and vanished with a long-drawn slithering down the corridor. The door swung open and remained open. The grille was withdrawn and a huge dark figure was framed in the glow of torches outside. The figure glided in, pulling the grille partly to behind it, leaving the bolt poised. As it moved into the light of the torch over Conan's head, the king saw that it was a gigantic black man, stark naked, bearing in one hand a huge sword and in the other a bunch of keys. The black spoke in a sea-coast dialect, and Conan replied; he had learned the jargon while a corsair on the coasts of Cush.

"Long have I wished to meet you, Amra," the black gave Conan the name by which the Cimmerian had been known to the Cushites in his piratical days—Amra, the Lion. The slave's woolly skull split in an animal-like grin, showing white tusks, but his eyes glinted redly in the torchlight. "I have dared much for this meeting. Look! The keys to your chains! I stole them from Shukeli. What will you give me for them?"

He dangled the keys in front of Conan's eyes.

"Ten thousand golden lunas," answered the king quickly, new hope surging fiercely in his breast.

"Not enough!" cried the black, a ferocious exultation shining on his ebon countenance. "Not enough for the risks I take. Tsotha's pets might come out of the dark and eat me, and if Shukeli finds out I stole his keys, he'll hang me up by my—well, what will you give me?"

"Fifteen thousand lunas and a palace in Poitain," offered the king.

The black yelled and stamped in a frenzy of barbaric gratification.

"More!" he cried. "Offer me more! What will you give me?"

"You black dog!" a red mist of fury swept across Conan's eyes. "Were I free I'd give you a broken back! Did Shukeli send you here to mock me?"

"Shukeli knows nothing of my coming, white man," answered the black, craning his thick neck to peer into Conan's savage eyes. "I know you from of old, since the days when I was a chief among a free people, before the Stygians took me and sold me into the north. Do you not remember the sack of Abombi, when your sea-wolves swarmed in? Before the palace of King Ajaga you slew a chief and a chief fled from you. It was my brother who died; it was I who fled. I demand of you a blood-price, Amra!"

"Free me and I'll pay you your weight in gold pieces," growled Conan.

The red eyes glittered, the white teeth flashed wolfishly in the torchlight.

"Aye, you white dog, you are like all your race; but to a black man gold can never pay for blood. The price I ask is —your head!"

The word was a maniacal shriek that sent the echoes shivering. Conan tensed, unconsciously straining against his shackles in his abhorrence of dying like a sheep; then he was frozen by a greater horror. Over the black's shoulder he saw a vague horrific form swaying in the darkness.

"Tsotha will never know!" laughed the black fiendishly, too engrossed in his gloating triumph to take heed of anything else, too drunk with hate to know that Death swayed behind his shoulder. "He will not come into the vaults until the demons have torn your bones from their chains. I will have your head, Amra!"

He braced his knotted legs like ebon columns and swung up the massive sword in both hands, his great black muscles rolling and cracking in the torchlight. And at that instant the titanic shadow behind him darted down and out, and the wedge-shaped head smote with an impact that re-echoed down the tunnels. Not a sound came from the thick blubbery lips that flew wide in fleeting agony. With the thud of the stroke, Conan saw the life go out of the wide black eyes with the suddenness of a candle blown out. The blow knocked the great black body clear across the corridor, and horribly the gigantic sinuous shape whipped around it in glistening coils that hid it from view, and the snap and splintering of bones came plainly to Conan's ears. Then something made his heart leap madly. The sword and the keys had flown from the black's hands to crush and jangle on the stone—and the keys lay almost at the king's feet.

He tried to bend to them, but the chain was too short, almost suffocated by the mad pounding of his heart, he slipped one foot from its sandal, and gripped them with his toes; drawing his foot up, he grasped them fiercely, barely stifling the yell of ferocious exultation that rose instinctively to his lips.

An instant's fumbling with the huge

locks and he was free. He caught up the fallen sword and glared about. Only empty darkness met his eyes, into which the serpent had dragged a mangled, tattered object that only faintly resembled a human body. Conan turned to the open door. A few quick strides brought him to the threshold—a squeal of high-pitched laughter shrilled through the vaults, and the grille shot home under his very fingers, the bolt crashed down. Through the bars peered a face like a fiendishly mocking carven gargoyle—Shukeli the eunuch, who had followed his stolen keys. Surely he did not, in his gloating, see the sword in the prisoner's hand. With a terrible curse Conan struck as a cobra strikes; the great blade hissed between the bars and Shukeli's laughter broke in a death-scream. The fat eunuch bent at the middle, as if bowing to his killer, and crumpled like tallow, his pudgy hands clutching vainly at his spilling entrails.

Conan snarled in savage satisfaction; but he was still a prisoner. His keys were futile against the bolt which could be worked only from the outside. His experienced touch told him the bars were hard as the sword; an attempt to hew his way to freedom would only splinter his one weapon. Yet he found dents on those adamantine bars, like the marks of incredible fangs, and wondered with an involuntary shudder what nameless monsters had assailed the barriers so terribly. Regardless, there was but one thing for him to do, and that was to seek some other outlet. Taking the torch from the niche, he set off down the corridor, sword in hand. He saw no sign of the serpent or its victim, only a great smear of blood on the stone floor.

DARKNESS stalked on noiseless feet about him, scarcely driven back by his flickering torch. On either hand he saw dark openings, but he kept to the main corridor, watching the floor ahead of him carefully, lest he fall into some pit. And suddenly he heard the sound of a woman, weeping piteously. Another of Tsotha's victims, he thought, cursing the wizard anew, and turning aside, followed the sound down a smaller tunnel, dank and damp.

The weeping grew nearer as he advanced, and lifting his torch, he made out a vague shape in the shadows. Stepping closer, he halted in sudden horror at the anthropomorphic bulk which sprawled before him. Its unstable outlines somewhat suggested an octopus, but its malformed tentacles were too short for its size, and its substance was a quaking, jelly-like stuff which made him physically sick to look at. From among this loathsome gelid mass reared up a frog-like head, and he was frozen with nauseated horror to realize that the sound of weeping was coming from those obscene blubbery lips. The noise changed to an abominable high-pitched tittering as the great unstable eyes of the monstrosity rested on him, and it hitched its quaking bulk toward him. He backed away and fled up the tunnel, not trusting his sword. The creature might be composed of terrestrial matter, but it shook his very soul to look upon it, and he doubted the power of man-made weapons to harm it. For a short distance he heard it flopping and floundering after him, screaming with horrible laughter. The unmistakably human note in its mirth almost staggered his reason. It was exactly such laughter as he had heard bubble obscenely from the fat lips of the salacious women of Shadizar, City of Wickedness, when captive girls were stripped naked on the public auction block. By what hellish arts had Tsotha brought this unnatural being into life? Conan felt vaguely that he had

looked on blasphemy against the eternal laws of nature.

He ran toward the main corridor, but before he reached it he crossed a sort of small square chamber, where two tunnels crossed. As he reached this chamber, he was flashingly aware of some small squat bulk on the floor ahead of him; then before he could check his flight or swerve aside, his foot struck something yielding that squalled shrilly, and he was precipitated headlong, the torch flying from his hand and being extinguished as it struck the stone floor. Half stunned by his fall, Conan rose and groped in the darkness. His sense of direction was confused, and he was unable to decide in which direction lay the main corridor. He did not look for the torch, as he had no means of rekindling it. His groping hands found the openings of the tunnels, and he chose one at random. How long he traversed it in utter darkness, he never knew, but suddenly his barbarian's instinct of near peril halted him short.

He had the same feeling he had had when standing on the brink of great precipices in the darkness. Dropping to all fours, he edged forward, and presently his outflung hand encountered the edge of a well, into which the tunnel floor apparently dropped abruptly. As far down as he could reach the sides fell away sheerly, dank and slimy to his touch. He stretched out an arm in the darkness and could barely touch the opposite edge with the point of his sword. He could leap across it then, but there was no point in that. He had taken the wrong tunnel and the main corridor lay somewhere behind him.

Even as he thought this, he felt a faint movement of air; a shadowy wind, rising from the well, stirred his black mane. Conan's skin crawled. He tried to tell himself that this well connected somehow with the outer world, but his instincts told him it was a thing unnatural. He was not merely inside the hill; he was below it, far below the level of the city streets. How then could an outer wind find its way into the pits and blow up from *below?* A faint throbbing pulsed on that ghostly wind, like drums beating far, far below. A strong shudder shook the king of Aquilonia.

He rose to his feet and backed away, and as he did *something* floated up out of the well. What it was, Conan did not know. He could see nothing in the darkness, but he distinctly felt a presence—an invisible, intangible intelligence which hovered malignly near him. Turning, he fled the way he had come. Far ahead he saw a tiny red spark. He headed for it, and long before he thought to have reached it, he caromed headlong into a solid wall and saw the spark at his feet. It was his torch, the flame extinguished, but the end a glowing coal. Carefully he took it up and blew upon it, fanning it into flame again. He gave a sigh as the tiny blaze leaped up. He was back in the chamber where the tunnels crossed, and his sense of direction came back.

He located the tunnel by which he had left the main corridor, and even as he started toward it, his torch-flame flickered wildly as if blown upon by unseen lips. Again he felt a presence, and he lifted his torch, glaring about.

He saw nothing; yet he sensed, somehow, an invisible, bodiless thing that hovered in the air, dripping slimily and mouthing obscenities that he could not hear but was in some instinctive way aware of. He swung viciously with his sword and it felt as if he were cleaving cobwebs. A cold horror shook him then, and he fled down the tunnel, feeling a

foul burning breath on his naked back as he ran.

But when he came out into the broad corridor, he was no longer aware of any presence, visible or invisible. Down it he went, momentarily expecting fanged and taloned fiends to leap at him from the darkness. The tunnels were not silent. From the bowels of the earth in all directions came sounds that did not belong in a sane world. There were titterings, squeals of demoniac mirth, long shuddering howls, and once the unmistakable squalling laughter of a hyena ended awfully in human words of shrieking blasphemy. He heard the pad of stealthy feet, and in the mouths of the tunnels caught glimpses of shadowy forms, monstrous and abnormal in outline.

It was as if he had wandered into hell —a hell of Tsotha-lanti's making. But the shadowy things did not come into the great corridor, though he distinctly heard the greedy sucking-in of slavering lips, and felt the burning glare of hungry eyes. And presently he knew why. A slithering sound behind him electrified him, and he leaped to the darkness of a near-by tunnel, shaking out his torch. Down the corridor he heard the great serpent crawling, sluggish from its recent grisly meal. From his very side something whimpered in fear and shrunk away in the darkness. Evidently the main corridor was the great snake's hunting-ground, and the other monsters gave it room.

To Conan the serpent was the least horror of them; he almost felt a kinship with it when he remembered the weeping, tittering obscenity, and the dripping, mouthing thing that came out of the well. At least it was of earthly matter; it was a crawling death, but it threatened only physical extinction, whereas these other horrors menaced mind and soul as well.

After it had passed on down the corridor, he followed, at what he hoped was a safe distance, blowing his torch into flame again. He had not gone far when he heard a low moan that seemed to emanate from the black entrance of a tunnel near by. Caution warned him on, but curiosity drove him to the tunnel, holding high the torch that was now little more than a stump. He was braced for the sight of anything, yet what he saw was what he had least expected. He was looking into a broad cell, and a space of this was caged off with closely set bars extending from floor to ceiling, set firmly in the stone. Within these bars lay a figure, which, as he approached, he saw was either a man, or the exact likeness of a man, twined and bound about with the tendrils of a thick vine which seemed to grow through the solid stone of the floor. It was covered with strangely pointed leaves and crimson blossoms—not the satiny red of natural petals, but a livid, unnatural crimson, like a perversity of flower-life. Its clinging, pliant branches wound about the man's naked body and limbs, seeming to caress his shrinking flesh with lustful avid kisses. One great blossom hovered exactly over his mouth. A low bestial moaning drooled from the loose lips; the head rolled as if in unbearable agony, and the eyes looked full at Conan. But there was no light of intelligence in them; they were blank, glassy, the eyes of an idiot.

Now the great crimson blossom dipped and pressed its petals over the writhing lips. The limbs of the wretch twisted in anguish; the tendrils of the plant quivered as if in ecstasy, vibrating their full snaky lengths. Waves of changing hues surged over them; their color grew deeper, more venomous.

Conan did not understand what he saw, but he knew that he looked on Hor-

ror of some kind. Man or demon, the suffering of the captive touched Conan's wayward and impulsive heart. He sought for entrance and found a grille-like door in the bars, fastened with a heavy lock, for which he found a key among the keys he carried, and entered. Instantly the petals of the livid blossoms spread like the hood of a cobra, the tendrils reared menacingly and the whole plant shook and swayed toward him. Here was no blind growth of natural vegetation. Conan sensed a strange, malignant intelligence; the plant could see him, and he felt its hate emanate from it in almost tangible waves. Stepping warily nearer, he marked the root-stem, a repulsively supple stalk thicker than his thigh, and even as the long tendrils arched toward him with a rattle of leaves and hiss, he swung his sword and cut through the stem with a single stroke.

Instantly the wretch in its clutches was thrown violently aside as the great vine lashed and knotted like a beheaded serpent, rolling into a huge irregular ball. The tendrils thrashed and writhed, the leaves shook and rattled like castanets, and petals opened and closed convulsively; then the whole length straightened out limply, the vivid colors paled and dimmed, a reeking white liquid oozed from the severed stump.

Conan stared, spellbound; then a sound brought him round, sword lifted. The freed man was on his feet, surveying him. Conan gaped in wonder. No longer were the eyes in the worn face expressionless. Dark and meditative, they were alive with intelligence, and the expression of imbecility had dropped from the face like a mask. The head was narrow and well-formed, with a high splendid forehead. The whole build of the man was aristocratic, evident no less in his tall slender frame than in his small trim feet and hands. His first words were strange and startling.

"What year is this?" he asked, speaking in Kothian.

"Today is the tenth day of the month Yuluk, of the year of the Gazelle," answered Conan.

"Yagkoolan Ishtar!" murmured the stranger. "Ten years!" He drew a hand across his brow, shaking his head as if to clear his brain from cobwebs. "All is dim yet. After a ten-year emptiness, the mind can not be expected to begin functioning clearly at once. Who are you?"

"Conan, once of Cimmeria. Now king of Aquilonia."

The other's eyes showed surprize.

"Indeed? And Numedides?"

"I strangled him on his throne the night I took the royal city," answered Conan.

A certain naïveté in the king's reply twitched the stranger's lips.

"Pardon, your majesty. I should have thanked you for the service you have done me. I am like a man woken suddenly from sleep deeper than death and shot with nightmares of agony more fierce than hell, but I understand that you delivered me. Tell me—why did you cut the stem of the plant Yothga instead of tearing it up by the roots?"

"Because I learned long ago to avoid touching with my flesh that which I do not understand," answered the Cimmerian.

"Well for you," said the stranger. "Had you been able to tear it up, you might have found things clinging to the roots against which not even your sword would prevail. Yothga's roots are set in hell."

"But who are you?" demanded Conan.

"Men called me Pelias."

"What!" cried the king. "Pelias the sorcerer, Tsotha-lanti's rival, who vanished from the earth ten years ago?"

"Not entirely from the earth," answered Pelias with a wry smile. "Tsotha preferred to keep me alive, in shackles more grim than rusted iron. He pent me in here with this devil-flower whose seeds drifted down through the black cosmos from Yag the Accursed, and found fertile field only in the maggot-writhing corruption that seethes on the floors of hell.

"I could not remember my sorcery and the words and symbols of my power, with that cursed thing gripping me and drinking my soul with its loathsome caresses. It sucked the contents of my mind day and night, leaving my brain as empty as a broken wine-jug. Ten years! Ishtar preserve us!"

CONAN found no reply, but stood holding the stump of the torch, and trailing his great sword. Surely the man was mad—yet there was no madness in the strange dark eyes that rested so calmly on him.

"Tell me, is the black wizard in Khorshemish? But no—you need not reply. My powers begin to wake, and I sense in your mind a great battle and a king trapped by treachery. And I see Tsotha-lanti riding hard for the Tybor with Strabonus and the king of Ophir. So much the better. My art is too frail from the long slumber to face Tsotha yet. I need time to recruit my strength, to assemble my powers. Let us go forth from these pits."

Conan jangled his keys discouragedly.

"The grille to the outer door is made fast by a bolt which can only be worked from outside. Is there no other exit from these tunnels?"

"Only one which neither of us would care to use, seeing that it goes down and not up," laughed Pelias. "But no matter. Let us see to the grille."

He moved toward the corridor with uncertain steps, as of long-unused limbs, which gradually became more sure. As he followed, Conan said uneasily, "There is a cursed big snake creeping about this tunnel. Let us be wary lest we step into his mouth."

"I remember him of old," answered Pelias grimly, "the more as I was forced to watch while ten of my acolytes were fed to him. He is Satha, the Old One, chiefest of Tsotha's pets."

"Did Tsotha dig these pits for no other reason than to house his cursed monstrosities?" asked Conan.

"He did not dig them. When the city was founded three thousand years ago there were ruins of an earlier city on and about this hill. King Khossus V, the founder, built his palace on the hill, and digging cellars beneath it, came upon a walled-up doorway, which he broke into and discovered the pits, which were about as we see them now. But his grand vizier came to such a grisly end in them that Khossus in a fright walled up the entrance again. He said the vizier fell into a well—but he had the cellars filled in, and later abandoned the palace itself, and built himself another in the suburbs, from which he fled in a panic on discovering some black mold scattered on the marble floor of his chamber one morning.

"He then departed with his whole court to the eastern corner of the kingdom and built a new city. The palace on the hill was not used and fell into ruins. When Akkutho I revived the lost glories of Khorshemish, he built a fortress there. It remained for Tsotha-lanti to rear the scarlet citadel and open the way to the pits again. Whatever fate overtook the grand vizier of Khossus, Tsotha avoided

it. He fell into no well, though he did descend into a well he found, and came out with a strange expression which has not since left his eyes.

"I have seen that well, but I do not care to seek in it for wisdom. I am a sorcerer, and older than men reckon, but I am human. As for Tsotha—men say that a dancing-girl of Shadizar slept too near the pre-human ruins on Dagoth Hill and woke in the grip of a black demon; from that unholy ruin was spawned an accursed hybrid men call Tsotha-lanti——"

Conan cried out sharply and recoiled, thrusting his companion back. Before them rose the great shimmering white form of Satha, an ageless hate in its eyes. Conan tensed himself for one mad berserker onslaught—to thrust the glowing fagot into that fiendish countenance and throw his life into the ripping sword-stroke. But the snake was not looking at him. It was glaring over his shoulder at the man called Pelias, who stood with his arms folded, smiling. And in the great cold yellow eyes slowly the hate died out in a glitter of pure fear—the only time Conan ever saw such an expression in a reptile's eyes. With a swirling rush like the sweep of a strong wind, the great snake was gone.

"What did he see to frighten him?" asked Conan, eyeing his companion uneasily.

"The scaled people see what escapes the mortal eye," answered Pelias cryptically. "You see my fleshly guise; he saw my naked soul."

An icy trickle disturbed Conan's spine, and he wondered if, after all, Pelias were a man, or merely another demon of the pits in a mask of humanity. He contemplated the advisability of driving his sword through his companion's back without further hesitation. But while he pondered, they came to the steel grille, etched blackly in the torches beyond, and the body of Shukeli, still slumped against the bars in a curdled welter of crimson.

Pelias laughed, and his laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"By the ivory hips of Ishtar, who is our doorman? Lo, it is no less than the noble Shukeli himself, who hanged my young men by their feet and skinned them with squeals of laughter! Do you sleep, Shukeli? Why do you lie so stiffly, with your fat belly sunk in like a dressed pig's?"

"He is dead," muttered Conan, ill at ease to hear these wild words.

"Dead or alive," laughed Pelias, "he shall open the door for us."

He clapped his hands sharply and cried, "Rise, Shukeli! Rise from hell and rise from the bloody floor and open the door for your masters! Rise, I say!"

An awful groan reverberated through the vaults. Conan's hair stood on end and he felt clammy sweat bead his hide. For the body of Shukeli stirred and moved, with infantile gropings of the fat hands. The laughter of Pelias was merciless as a flint hatchet, as the form of the eunuch reeled upright, clutching at the bars of the grille. Conan, glaring at him, felt his blood turn to ice, and the marrow of his bones to water; for Shukeli's wide-open eyes were glassy and empty, and from the great gash in his belly his entrails hung limply to the floor. The eunuch's feet stumbled among his entrails as he worked the bolt, moving like a brainless automaton. When he had first stirred, Conan had thought that by some incredible chance the eunuch was alive; but the man was dead—had been dead for hours.

Pelias sauntered through the opened grille, and Conan crowded through behind him, sweat pouring from his body,

shrinking away from the awful shape that slumped on sagging legs against the grate it held open. Pelias passed on without a backward glance, and Conan followed him, in the grip of nightmare and nausea. He had not taken half a dozen strides when a sodden thud brought him round. Shukeli's corpse lay limply at the foot of the grille.

"His task is done, and hell gapes for him again," remarked Pelias pleasantly, politely affecting not to notice the strong shudder which shook Conan's mighty frame.

He led the way up the long stairs, and through the brass skull-crowned door at the top. Conan gripped his sword, expecting a rush of slaves, but silence gripped the citadel. They passed through the black corridor and came into that in which the censers swung, billowing forth their everlasting incense. Still they saw no one.

"The slaves and soldiers are quartered in another part of the citadel," remarked Pelias. "Tonight, their master being away, they doubtless lie drunk on wine or lotus-juice."

CONAN glanced through an arched, golden-silled window that let out upon a broad balcony, and swore in surprize to see the dark-blue star-flecked sky. It had been shortly after sunrise when he was thrown into the pits. Now it was past midnight. He could scarcely realize he had been so long underground. He was suddenly aware of thirst and a ravenous appetite. Pelias led the way into a golden-domed chamber, floored with silver, its lapis-lazuli walls pierced by the fretted arches of many doors.

With a sigh Pelias sank onto a silken divan.

"Silks and gold again," he sighed. "Tsotha affects to be above the pleasures of the flesh, but he is half devil. I am human, despite my black arts. I love ease and good cheer—that's how Tsotha trapped me. He caught me helpless with drink. Wine is a curse—by the ivory bosom of Ishtar, even as I speak of it, the traitor is here! Friend, please pour me a goblet—hold! I forgot you are a king. I will pour."

"The devil with that," growled Conan, filling a crystal goblet and proffering it to Pelias. Then, lifting the jug, he drank deeply from the mouth, echoing Pelias' sigh of satisfaction.

"The dog knows good wine," said Conan, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "But by Crom, Pelias, are we to sit here until his soldiers awake and cut our throats?"

"No fear," answered Pelias. "Would you like to see how fortune holds with Strabonus?"

Blue fire burned in Conan's eyes and he gripped his sword until his knuckles showed blue. "Oh, to be at sword-points with him!" he rumbled.

Pelias lifted a great shimmering globe from an ebony table.

"Tsotha's crystal. A childish toy, but useful when there is lack of time for higher science. Look in, your majesty."

He laid it on the table before Conan's eyes. The king looked into cloudy depths which deepened and expanded. Slowly images crystallized out of mist and shadows. He was looking on a familiar landscape. Broad plains ran to a wide winding river, beyond which the level lands ran up quickly into a maze of low hills. On the northern bank of the river stood a walled town, guarded by a moat connected at each end with the river.

"By Crom!" ejaculated Conan. "It's Shamar! The dogs besiege it!"

The invaders had crossed the river;

their pavilions stood in the narrow plain between the city and the hills. Their warriors swarmed about the walls, their mail gleaming palely under the moon. Arrows and stones rained on them from the towers and they staggered back, but came on again.

Even as Conan cursed, the scene changed. Tall spires and gleaming domes stood up in the mist, and he looked on his own capital of Tamar, where all was confusion. He saw the steel-clad knights of Poitain, his staunchest supporters, whom he had left in charge of the city, riding out of the gate, hooted and hissed by the multitude which swarmed the streets. He saw looting and rioting, and men-at-arms whose shields bore the insignia of Pellia, manning the towers and swaggering through the markets. Over all, like a fantasmal picture, he saw the dark, triumphant face of Prince Arpello of Pellia. The images faded.

"So!" cursed Conan. "My people turn on me the moment my back is turned——"

"Not entirely," broke in Pelias. "They have heard that you are dead. There is no one to protect them from outer enemies and civil war, they think. Naturally, they turn to the strongest noble, to avoid the horrors of anarchy. They do not trust the Poitanians, remembering former wars. But Arpello is on hand, and the strongest prince of the central realm."

"When I come to Aquilonia again he will be but a headless corpse rotting on Traitor's Common," Conan ground his teeth.

"Yet before you can reach your capital," reminded Pelias, "Strabonus may be before you. At least his riders will be ravaging your kingdom."

"True!" Conan paced the chamber like a caged lion. "With the fastest horse I could not reach Shamar before midday. Even there I could do no good except to die with the people, when the town falls —as fall it will in a few days at most. From Shamar to Tamar is five days' ride, even if you kill your horses on the road. Before I could reach my capital and raise an army, Strabonus would be hammering at the gates; because raising an army is going to be hell—all my damnable nobles will have scattered to their own cursed fiefs at the word of my death. And since the people have driven out Trocero of Poitain, there's none to keep Arpello's greedy hands off the crown—and the crown-treasure. He'll hand the country over to Strabonus, in return for a mock-throne—and as soon as Strabonus' back is turned, he'll stir up revolt. But the nobles won't support him, and it will only give Strabonus excuse for annexing the kingdom openly. Oh Crom, Ymir, and Set! If I but had wings to fly like lightning to Tamar!"

Pelias, who sat tapping the jade tabletop with his finger-nails, halted suddenly, and rose as with a definite purpose, beckoning Conan to follow. The king complied, sunk in moody thoughts, and Pelias led the way out of the chamber and up a flight of marble, gold-worked stairs that let out on the pinnacle of the citadel, the roof of the tallest tower. It was night, and a strong wind was blowing through the star-filled skies, stirring Conan's black mane. Far below them twinkled the lights of Khorshemish, seemingly farther away than the stars above them. Pelias seemed withdrawn and aloof here, one in cold unhuman greatness with the company of the stars.

"There are creatures," said Pelias, "not alone of earth and sea, but of air and the far reaches of the skies as well, dwelling apart, unguessed of men. Yet to him

who holds the Master-words and Signs and the Knowledge underlying all, they are not malignant nor inaccessible. Watch, and fear not."

He lifted his hands to the skies and sounded a long weird call that seemed to shudder endlessly out into space, dwindling and fading, yet never dying out, only receding farther and farther into some unreckoned cosmos. In the silence that followed, Conan heard a sudden beat of wings in the stars, and recoiled as a huge bat-like creature alighted beside him. He saw its great calm eyes regarding him in the starlight; he saw the forty-foot spread of its giant wings. And he saw it was neither bat nor bird.

"Mount and ride," said Pelias. "By dawn it will bring you to Tamar."

"By Crom!" muttered Conan. "Is this all a nightmare from which I shall presently awaken in my palace at Tamar? What of you? I would not leave you alone among your enemies."

"Be at ease regarding me," answered Pelias. "At dawn the people of Khorshemish will know they have a new master. Doubt not what the gods have sent you. I will meet you in the plain by Shamar."

Doubtfully Conan clambered upon the ridged back, gripping the arched neck, still convinced that he was in the grasp of a fantastic nightmare. With a great rush and thunder of titan wings, the creature took the air, and the king grew dizzy as he saw the lights of the city dwindle far below him.

4

"The sword that slays the king cuts the cords of the empire."

—Aquilonian proverb.

THE streets of Tamar swarmed with howling mobs, shaking fists and rusty pikes. It was the hour before dawn of the second day after the battle of Shamar, and events had occurred so swiftly as to daze the mind. By means known only to Tsotha-lanti, word had reached Tamar of the king's death, within half a dozen hours after the battle. Chaos had resulted. The barons had deserted the royal capital, galloping away to secure their castles against marauding neighbors. The well-knit kingdom Conan had built up seemed tottering on the edge of dissolution, and commoners and merchants trembled at the imminence of a return of the feudalistic regime. The people howled for a king to protect them against their own aristocracy no less than foreign foes. Count Trocero, left by Conan in charge of the city, tried to reassure them, but in their unreasoning terror they remembered old civil wars, and how this same count had besieged Tamar fifteen years before. It was shouted in the streets that Trocero had betrayed the king; that he planned to plunder the city. The mercenaries began looting the quarters, dragging forth screaming merchants and terrified women.

Trocero swept down on the looters, littered the streets with their corpses, drove them back into their quarter in confusion, and arrested their leaders. Still the people rushed wildly about, with brainless squawks, screaming that the count had incited the riot for his own purposes.

Prince Arpello came before the distracted council and announced himself ready to take over the government of the city until a new king could be decided upon, Conan having no son. While they debated, his agents stole subtly among the people, who snatched at a shred of royalty. The council heard the storm outside the palace windows, where the multitude roared for Arpello the Rescuer. The council surrendered.

Trocero at first refused the order to give up his baton of authority, but the people swarmed about him, hissing and howling, hurling stones and offal at his knights. Seeing the futility of a pitched battle in the streets with Arpello's retainers, under such conditions, Trocero hurled the baton in his rival's face, hanged the leaders of the mercenaries in the market-square as his last official act, and rode out of the southern gate at the head of his fifteen hundred steel-clad knights. The gates slammed behind him and Arpello's suave mask fell away to reveal the grim visage of the hungry wolf.

With the mercenaries cut to pieces or hiding in their barracks, his were the only soldiers in Tamar. Sitting his warhorse in the great square, Arpello proclaimed himself king of Aquilonia, amid the clamor of the deluded multitude.

Publius the Chancellor, who opposed this move, was thrown into prison. The merchants, who had greeted the proclamation of a king with relief, now found with consternation that the new monarch's first act was to levy a staggering tax on them. Six rich merchants, sent as a delegation of protest, were seized and their heads slashed off without ceremony. A shocked and stunned silence followed this execution. The merchants, as is the habit of merchants when confronted by a power they can not control with money, fell on their fat bellies and licked their oppressor's boots.

The common people were not perturbed at the fate of the merchants, but they began to murmur when they found that the swaggering Pellian soldiery, pretending to maintain order, were as bad as Turanian bandits. Complaints of extortion, murder and rape poured in to Arpello, who had taken up his quarters in Publius' palace, because the desperate councillors, doomed by his order, were holding the royal palace against his soldiers. He had taken possession of the pleasure-palace, however, and Conan's girls were dragged to his quarters. The people muttered at the sight of the royal beauties writhing in the brutal hands of the iron-clad retainers—dark-eyed damsels of Poitain, slim black-haired wenches from Zamora, Zingara and Hyrkania, Brythunian girls with tousled yellow heads, all weeping with fright and shame, unused to brutality.

Night fell on a city of bewilderment and turmoil, and before midnight word spread mysteriously in the street that the Kothians had followed up their victory and were hammering at the walls of Shamar. Somebody in Tsotha's mysterious secret-service had babbled. Fear shook the people like an earthquake, and they did not even pause to wonder at the witchcraft by which the news had been so swiftly transmitted. They stormed at Arpello's doors, demanding that he march southward and drive the enemy back over the Tybor. He might have subtly pointed out that his force was not sufficient, and that he could not raise an army until the barons recognized his claim to the crown. But he was drunk with power, and laughed in their faces.

A young student, Athemides, mounted a column in the market, and with burning words accused Arpello of being a catspaw for Strabonus, painting a vivid picture of existence under Kothian rule, with Arpello as satrap. Before he finished, the multitude was screaming with fear and howling with rage. Arpello sent his soldiers to arrest the youth, but the people caught him up and fled with him, deluging the pursuing retainers with stones and dead cats. A volley of crossbow quarrels routed the mob, and a charge of horsemen littered the market

with bodies, but Athemides was smuggled out of the city to plead with Trocero to retake Tamar, and march to aid Shamar.

Athemides found Trocero breaking his camp outside the walls, ready to march to Poitain, in the far southwestern corner of the kingdom. To the youth's urgent pleas he answered that he had neither the force necessary to storm Tamar, even with the aid of the mob inside, nor to face Strabonus. Besides, avaricious nobles would plunder Poitain behind his back, while he was fighting the Kothians. With the king dead, each man must protect his own. He was riding to Poitain, there to defend it as best he might against Arpello and his foreign allies.

WHILE Athemides pleaded with Trocero, the mob still raved in the city with helpless fury. Under the great tower beside the royal palace the people swirled and milled, screaming their hate at Arpello, who stood on the turrets and laughed down at them while his archers ranged the parapets, bolts drawn and fingers on the triggers of their arbalests.

The prince of Pellia was a broad-built man of medium height, with a dark stern face. He was an intriguer, but he was also a fighter. Under his silken jupon with its gilt-braided skirts and jagged sleeves, glimmered burnished steel. His long black hair was curled and scented, and bound back with a cloth-of-silver band, but at his hip hung a broadsword the jeweled hilt of which was worn with battles and campaigns.

"Fools! Howl as you will! Conan is dead and Arpello is king!"

What if all Aquilonia were leagued against him? He had men enough to hold the mighty walls until Strabonus came up. But Aquilonia was divided against itself. Already the barons were girding themselves each to seize his neighbor's treasure. Arpello had only the helpless mob to deal with. Strabonus would carve through the loose lines of the warring barons as a galley-ram through foam, and until his coming, Arpello had only to hold the royal capital.

"Fools! Arpello is king!"

The sun was rising over the eastern towers. Out of the crimson dawn came a flying speck that grew to a bat, then to an eagle. Then all who saw screamed in amazement, for over the walls of Tamar swooped a shape such as men knew only in half-forgotten legends, and from between its titan-wings sprang a human form as it roared over the great tower. Then with a deafening thunder of wings it was gone, and the folk blinked, wondering if they dreamed. But on the turret stood a wild barbaric figure, half naked, blood-stained, brandishing a great sword. And from the multitude rose a roar that rocked the very towers, "The king! It is the king!"

Arpello stood transfixed; then with a cry he drew and leaped at Conan. With a lion-like roar the Cimmerian parried the whistling blade, then dropping his own sword, gripped the prince and heaved him high above his head by crotch and neck.

"Take your plots to hell with you!" he roared, and like a sack of salt, he hurled the prince of Pellia far out, to fall through empty space for a hundred and fifty feet. The people gave back as the body came hurtling down, to smash on the marble pave, spattering blood and brains, and lie crushed in its splintered armor, like a mangled beetle.

The archers on the tower shrank back, their nerve broken. They fled, and the beleaguered councilmen sallied from the palace and hewed into them with joyous

abandon. Pellian knights and men-at-arms sought safety in the streets, and the crowd tore them to pieces. In the streets the fighting milled and eddied, plumed helmets and steel caps tossed among the tousled heads and then vanished; swords hacked madly in a heaving forest of pikes, and over all rose the roar of the mob, shouts of acclaim mingling with screams of blood-lust and howls of agony. And high above all, the naked figure of the king rocked and swayed on the dizzy battlements, mighty arms brandished, roaring with gargantuan laughter that mocked all mobs and princes, even himself.

3

A long bow and a strong bow, and let the sky grow dark!
The cord to the nock, the shaft to the ear, and the king of Koth for a mark!
—Song of the Bossonian archers.

THE midafternoon sun glinted on the placid waters of the Tybor, washing the southern bastions of Shamar. The haggard defenders knew that few of them would see that sun rise again. The pavilions of the besiegers dotted the plain. The people of Shamar had not been able successfully to dispute the crossing of the river, outnumbered as they were. Barges, chained together, made a bridge over which the invader poured his hordes. Strabonus had not dared march on into Aquilonia with Shamar, unsubdued, at his back. He had sent his light riders, his spahis, inland to ravage the country, and had reared up his siege engines in the plain. He had anchored a flotilla of boats, furnished him by Amalrus, in the middle of the stream, over against the river-wall. Some of these boats had been sunk by stones from the city's ballistas, which crashed through their decks and ripped out their planking, but the rest held their places and from their bows and mast-heads, protected by mantlets, archers raked the riverward turrets. These were Shemites, born with bows in their hands, not to be matched by Aquilonian bowmen.

On the landward side mangonels rained boulders and tree-trunks among the defenders, shattering through roofs and crushing humans like beetles; rams pounded incessantly at the stones; sappers burrowed like moles in the earth, sinking their mines beneath the towers. The moat had been dammed at the upper end, and emptied of its water, had been filled up with boulders, earth and dead horses and men. Under the walls the mailed figures swarmed, battering at the gates, rearing up scaling-ladders, pushing storming-towers, thronged with spearmen, against the turrets.

Hope had been abandoned in the city, where a bare fifteen hundred men resisted forty thousand warriors. No word had come from the kingdom whose outpost the city was. Conan was dead, so the invaders shouted exultantly. Only the strong walls and the desperate courage of the defenders had kept them so long at bay, and that could not suffice for ever. The western wall was a mass of rubbish on which the defenders stumbled in hand-to-hand conflict with the invaders. The other walls were buckling from the mines beneath them, the towers leaning drunkenly.

Now the attackers were massing for a storm. The oliphants sounded, the steel-clad ranks drew up on the plain. The storming-towers, covered with raw bull-hides, rumbled forward. The people of Shamar saw the banners of Koth and Ophir, flying side by side, in the center, and made out, among their gleaming knights, the slim lethal figure of the golden-mailed Amalrus, and the squat black-armored form of Strabonus. And

between them was a shape that made the bravest blench with horror—a lean vulture figure in a filmy robe. The pikemen moved forward, flowing over the ground like the glinting waves of a river of molten steel; the knights cantered forward, lances lifted, guidons streaming. The warriors on the walls drew a long breath, consigned their souls to Mitra, and gripped their notched and red-stained weapons.

Then without warning, a bugle-call cut the din. A drum of hoofs rose above the rumble of the approaching host. North of the plain across which the army moved, rose ranges of low hills, mounting northward and westward like giant stair-steps. Now down out of these hills, like spume blown before a storm, shot the spahis who had been laying waste the countryside, riding low and spurring hard, and behind them the sun shimmering on moving ranks of steel. They moved into full view, out of the defiles — mailed horsemen, the great lion banner of Aquilonia floating over them.

From the electrified watchers on the towers a great shout rent the skies. In ecstasy warriors clashed their notched swords on their riven shields, and the people of the town, ragged beggars and rich merchants, harlots in red kirtles and dames in silks and satins, fell to their knees and cried out for joy to Mitra, tears of gratitude streaming down their faces.

Strabonus, frantically shouting orders, with Arbanus, that would wheel around the ponderous lines to meet this unexpected menace, grunted, "We still outnumber them, unless they have reserves hidden in the hills. The men on the battle-towers can mask any sorties from the city. These are Poitanians—we might have guessed Trocero would try some such mad gallantry."

Amalrus cried out in unbelief.

"I see Trocero and his captain Prospero—*but who rides between them?*"

"Ishtar preserve us!" shrieked Strabonus, paling. "It is King Conan!"

"You are mad!" squalled Tsotha, starting convulsively. "Conan has been in Satha's belly for days!" He stopped short, glaring wildly at the host which was dropping down, file by file, into the plain. He could not mistake the giant figure in black, gilt-worked armor on the great black stallion, riding beneath the billowing silken folds of the great banner. A scream of feline fury burst from Tsotha's lips, flecking his beard with foam. For the first time in his life, Strabonus saw the wizard completely upset, and shrank from the sight.

"Here is sorcery!" screamed Tsotha, clawing madly at his beard. "How could he have escaped and reached his kingdom in time to return with an army so quickly? This is the work of Pelias, curse him! I feel his hand in this! May I be cursed for not killing him when I had the power!"

THE kings gaped at the mention of a man they believed ten years dead, and panic, emanating from the leaders, shook the host. All recognized the rider on the black stallion. Tsotha felt the superstitious dread of his men, and fury made a hellish mask of his face.

"Strike home!" he screamed, brandishing his lean arms madly. "We are still the stronger! Charge and crush these dogs! We shall yet feast in the ruins of Shamar tonight! Oh Set!" he lifted his hands and invoked the serpent-god to even Strabonus' horror, "grant us victory and I swear I will offer up to thee five hundred virgins of Shamar, writhing in their blood!"

Meanwhile the opposing host had de-

bouched onto the plain. With the knights came what seemed a second, irregular army on tough swift ponies. These dismounted and formed their ranks on foot —stolid Bossonian archers, and keen pikemen from Gunderland, their tawny locks blowing from under their steel caps.

It was a motley army Conan had assembled, in the wild hours following his return to his capital. He had beaten the frothing mob away from the Pellian soldiers who held the outer walls of Tamar, and impressed them into his service. He had sent a swift rider after Trocero to bring him back. With these as a nucleus of an army he had raced southward, sweeping the countryside for recruits and for mounts. Nobles of Tamar and the surrounding countryside had augmented his forces, and he had levied recruits from every village and castle along his road. Yet it was but a paltry force he had gathered to dash against the invading hosts, though of the quality of tempered steel.

Nineteen hundred armored horsemen followed him, the main bulk of which consisted of the Poitanian knights. The remnants of the mercenaries and professional soldiers in the trains of loyal noblemen made up his infantry—five thousand archers and four thousand pikemen. This host now came on in good order —first the archers, then the pikemen, behind them the knights, moving at a walk.

Over against them Arbanus ordered his lines, and the allied army moved forward like a shimmering ocean of steel. The watchers on the city walls shook to see that vast host, which overshadowed the powers of the rescuers. First marched the Shemitish archers, then the Kothian spearmen, then the mailed knights of Strabonus and Amalrus. Arbanus' intent was obvious—to employ his footmen to sweep away the infantry of Conan, and open the way for an overpowering charge of his heavy cavalry.

The Shemites opened fire at five hundred yards, and arrows flew like hail between the hosts, darkening the sun. The western archers, trained by a thousand years of merciless warfare with the Pictish savages, came stolidly on, closing their ranks as their comrades fell. They were far outnumbered, and the Shemitish bow had the longer range, but in accuracy the Bossonians were equal to their foes, and they balanced sheer skill in archery by superiority in morale, and in excellence of armor. Within good range they loosed, and the Shemites went down by whole ranks. The blue-bearded warriors in their light mail shirts could not endure punishment as could the heavier-armored Bossonians. They broke, throwing away their bows, and their flight disordered the ranks of the Kothian spearmen behind them.

Without the support of the archers, these men-at-arms fell by the hundreds before the shafts of the Bossonians, and charging in madly to close quarters, they were met by the spears of the pikemen. No infantry was a match for the wild Gundermen, whose homeland, the northernmost province of Aquilonia, was but a day's ride across the Bossonian marches from the borders of Cimmeria, and who, born and bred to battle, were the purest blood of all the Hyborian peoples. The Kothian spearmen, dazed by their losses from arrows, were cut to pieces and fell back in disorder.

Strabonus roared in fury as he saw his infantry repulsed, and shouted for a general charge. Arbanus demurred, pointing out the Bossonians re-forming in good order before the Aquilonian knights, who had sat their steeds motionless during the mêlée. The general

advised a temporary retirement, to draw the western knights out of the cover of the bows, but Strabonus was mad with rage. He looked at the long shimmering ranks of his knights, he glared at the handful of mailed figures over against him, and he commanded Arbanus to give the order to charge.

The general commended his soul to Ishtar and sounded the golden oliphant. With a thunderous roar the forest of lances dipped, and the great host rolled across the plain, gaining momentum as it came. The whole plain shook to the rumbling avalanche of hoofs, and the shimmer of gold and steel dazzled the watchers on the towers of Shamar.

The squadrons clave the loose ranks of the spearmen, riding down friend and foe alike, and rushed into the teeth of a blast of arrows from the Bossonians. Across the plain they thundered, grimly riding the storm that scattered their way with gleaming knights like autumn leaves. Another hundred paces and they would ride among the Bossonians and cut them down like corn; but flesh and blood could not endure the rain of death that now ripped and howled among them. Shoulder to shoulder, feet braced wide, stood the archers, drawing shaft to ear and loosing as one man, with deep short shouts.

The whole front rank of the knights melted away, and over the pin-cushioned corpses of horses and riders, their comrades stumbled and fell headlong. Arbanus was down, an arrow through his throat, his skull smashed by the hoofs of his dying war-horse, and confusion ran through the disordered host. Strabonus was screaming an order, Amalrus another, and through all ran the superstitious dread the sight of Conan had awakened.

And while the gleaming ranks milled in confusion, the trumpets of Conan sounded, and through the opening ranks of the archers crashed home the terrible charge of the Aquilonian knights.

THE hosts met with a shock like that of an earthquake, that shook the tottering towers of Shamar. The disordered squadrons of the invaders could not withstand the solid steel wedge, bristling with spears, that rushed like a thunderbolt against them. The long lances of the attackers ripped their ranks to pieces, and into the heart of their host rode the knights of Poitain, swinging their terrible two-handed swords.

The clash and clangor of steel was as that of a million sledges on as many anvils. The watchers on the walls were stunned and deafened by the thunder as they gripped the battlements and watched the steel maelstrom swirl and eddy, where plumes tossed high among the flashing swords, and standards dipped and reeled.

Amalrus went down, dying beneath the trampling hoofs, his shoulder-bone hewn in twain by Prospero's two-handed sword. The invaders' numbers had engulfed the nineteen hundred knights of Conan, but about this compact wedge, which hewed deeper and deeper into the looser formation of their foes, the knights of Koth and Ophir swirled and smote in vain. They could not break the wedge.

Archers and pikemen, having disposed of the Kothian infantry which was strewn in disorderly flight across the plain, came to the edges of the fight, loosing their arrows point-blank, running in to slash at girths and horses' bellies with their knives, thrusting upward to spit the riders on their long pikes.

At the tip of the steel wedge Conan roared his heathen battle-cry and swung his great sword in glittering arcs of death

that made naught of steel burganet or mail haburgeon. Straight through a thundering waste of steel-sheathed foes he rode, and the knights of Koth closed in behind him, cutting him off from his warriors. As a thunderbolt strikes, Conan struck, hurtling through the ranks by sheer power and velocity, until he came to Strabonus, livid, among his palace troops. Now here the battle hung in balance, for with his superior numbers, Strabonus still had opportunity to pluck victory from the knees of the gods.

But he screamed when he saw his arch-foe within arm's length at last, and lashed out wildly with his ax. It clanged on Conan's helmet, striking fire, and the Cimmerian reeled and struck back. The five-foot blade crushed Strabonus' casque and skull, and the king's charger reeled screaming, hurling a limp and sprawling corpse from the saddle. A great cry went up from the host, which faltered and gave back. Trocero and his house troops, hewing desperately, cut their way to Conan's side, and the great banner of Koth went down. Then behind the dazed and stricken invaders went up a mighty clamor and the blaze of a huge conflagration. The defenders of Shamar had made a desperate sortie, cut down the men masking the gates, and were raging among the tents of the besiegers, cutting down the camp followers, burning the pavilions, and destroying the siege engines. It was the last straw. The gleaming army melted away in flight and the furious conquerors cut them down as they ran.

The fugitives raced for the river, but the men on the flotilla, harried sorely by the stones and shafts of the revived citizens, cast loose and pulled for the southern shore, leaving their comrades to their fate. Of these many gained the shore, racing across the barges that served as a bridge, until the men of Shamar cut these adrift and severed them from the shore. Then the fight became a slaughter. Driven into the river to drown in their armor, or hacked down along the bank, the invaders perished by thousands. No quarter they had promised; no quarter they got.

From the foot of the low hills to the shores of the Tybor, the plain was littered with corpses, and the river whose tide ran red, floated thick with the dead. Of the nineteen hundred knights who had ridden south with Conan, scarcely five hundred lived to boast of their scars, and the slaughter among the archers and pikemen was ghastly. But the great and shining host of Strabonus and Amalrus was hacked out of existence, and those that fled were less than those that died.

WHILE the slaughter yet went on along the river, the final act of a grim drama was being played out in the meadowland beyond. Among those who had crossed the barge-bridge before it was destroyed was Tsotha, riding like the wind on a gaunt weird-looking steed whose stride no natural horse could match. Ruthlessly riding down friend and foe, he gained the southern bank, and then a glance backward showed him a grim figure on a great black stallion in mad pursuit. The lashings had already been cut, and the barges were drifting apart, but Conan came recklessly on, leaping his steed from boat to boat as a man might leap from one cake of floating ice to another. Tsotha screamed a curse, but the great stallion took the last leap with a straining groan, and gained the southern bank. Then the wizard fled away into the empty meadowland, and on his trail came the king, riding madly and silently, swinging the great sword that spattered his trail with crimson drops.

On they fled, the hunted and the hunt-

er, and not a foot could the black stallion gain, though he strained each nerve and thew. Through a sunset land of dim light and illusive shadows they fled, till sight and sound of the slaughter died out behind them. Then in the sky appeared a dot, that grew into a huge eagle as it approached. Swooping down from the sky, it drove at the head of Tsotha's steed, which screamed and reared, throwing his rider.

Old Tsotha rose and faced his pursuer, his eyes those of a maddened serpent, his face an inhuman mask of awful fury. In each hand he held something that shimmered, and Conan knew he held death there.

The king dismounted and strode toward his foe, his armor clanking, his great sword gripped high.

"Again we meet, wizard!" he grinned savagely.

"Keep off!" screamed Tsotha like a blood-mad jackal. "I'll blast the flesh from your bones! You can not conquer me—if you hack me in pieces, the bits of flesh and bone will reunite and haunt you to your doom! I see the hand of Pelias in this, but I defy ye both! I am Tsotha, son of——"

Conan rushed, sword gleaming, eyes slits of wariness. Tsotha's right hand came back and forward, and the king ducked quickly. Something passed by his helmeted head and exploded behind him, searing the very sands with a flash of hellish fire. Before Tsotha could toss the globe in his left hand, Conan's sword sheared through his lean neck. The wizard's head shot from his shoulders on an arching fount of blood, and the robed figure staggered and crumpled drunkenly. Yet the mad black eyes glared up at Conan with no dimming of their feral light, the lips writhed awfully, and the hands groped hideously, as if searching for the severed head. Then with a swift rush of wings, something swooped from the sky—the eagle which had attacked Tsotha's horse. In its mighty talons it snatched up the dripping head and soared skyward, and Conan stood struck dumb, for from the eagle's throat boomed human laughter, in the voice of Pelias the sorcerer.

Then a hideous thing came to pass, for the headless body reared up from the sand and staggered away in awful flight on stiffening legs, hands outstretched blindly toward the dot speeding and dwindling in the dusky sky. Conan stood like one turned to stone, watching until the swift reeling figure faded in the dusk that purpled the meadows.

"Crom!" his mighty shoulders twitched. "A murrain on these wizardly feuds! Pelias has dealt well with me, but I care not if I see him no more. Give me a clean sword and a clean foe to flesh it in. Damnation! What would I not give for a flagon of wine!"

Buccaneers of Venus

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

A powerful weird-scientific story by a master of science-fiction—a swift-moving tale of piracy, and weird monsters on another planet

The Story Thus Far

ROBERT GRANDON, young Chicago clubman who had fought his way to the throne of Reabon, mightiest empire of the planet Venus, was honeymooning on the sea-coast with his beautiful young bride, Vernia, Princess of Reabon, when she was carried off by the Huitsenni, a hairless, toothless yellow race of buccaneers against which Grandon had previously formed a secret alliance with four other Venusian rulers.

Grandon instantly set out in pursuit of the pirate fleet in a small fishing-boat, with only one companion, Kantar the Gunner, who was an expert with Venusian machine-guns, and managed to get aboard the flagship.

Vernia, meanwhile, was abducted by one of the pirates and carried to an island inhabited by the Valkars, or Toad People. Here she was captured by the Valkars, and offered as a sacrifice to their deity, Sistabez, a gigantic serpent.

Grandon and Kantar followed, and reached the Valkar village in time to rescue Vernia and escape to the coast. Here they were ambushed and recaptured by the Huitsenni, and taken to Huitsen, the hidden port of the buccaneers, through a secret gate in the tremendous cliffs that fronted the southern shore of the Azpok ocean.

Vernia was taken before Yin Yin, King of Huitsen, who imprisoned her in his harem, after informing her that she had been captured because a tremendous ransom had been offered for her by one of the rulers of a Venusian empire. She guessed that the man who had made this offer was Zanaloth, ruler of Memerum, who had once insulted her when she passed through his domain, and Yin Yin did not deny it.

In an effort to come to her rescue, Grandon and Kantar managed to escape their captors by diving off the gangplank and swimming beneath the piling which supported the streets of Huitsen above the water over which the pirate city was built.

Vernia, meanwhile, was prepared by the slave-girls for the visit of Yin Yin to her apartments in the harem.

CHAPTER 11

THE SEA-RATS

AS SOON as Grandon's hands struck the water, after he had dived from the gangplank, he turned them so that his momentum carried him underneath the dock. A moment later his head bobbed to the surface, and he had the satisfaction of seeing that Kantar and San Thoy had followed his example, as both came up quite near him. From above came the rattle of tork fire, the bullets cutting into the water where the three fugitives had disappeared.

"You know this place," Grandon said to the yellow man. "Where can we hide?"

"First we must get behind the warehouse," replied San Thoy. "Follow me."

He struck out, and despite his portliness, proved to be an excellent swimmer. Grandon later learned that this was a racial and not an individual characteristic,

This story began in WEIRD TALES for November

"The Earth-man attacked with the brilliant display of swordsmanship which had made him famous throughout all Zorovia."

as all the Huitsenni, being reared on the water, swam fully as well as they walked, if not a shade better. Just now, however, he was sorely put to it to keep pace with the rotund pirate, while Kantar, the slowest of the three, trailed behind them.

San Thoy swiftly led them through a dark and narrow passage between two stone walls—the foundations of two warehouses. Above him, Grandon could hear shouts, curses, commands, and men running on the planking.

Once through the passage, the pirate waited for the others to come up with him.

Here it was so murky that Grandon could barely see the faces of his companions.

"They will send boats and fast swimmers," whispered San Thoy, "but if we are quiet it may be that we can elude them. It will soon be dark, and the darkness will be our ally. Follow closely behind me, and do not splash or talk."

Once more they set off, with the pirate in the lead. They were in a wilderness of posts, the piling that supported the planking of the street level, which was about fifteen feet above their heads. The rows of piles were broken at intervals of about fifty feet by the circular foundations of houses. Many of the fishing-holes in front of these dwellings were open, admitting considerable daylight. And Grandon noticed that boats were moored in front of all of them, while deeply notched poles projecting down through the holes formed ladders by which they could be reached from above.

San Thoy, however, avoided the fronts of the houses with their fishing-holes, and followed the lanes at the backs of the buildings, where it was so dark that objects were visible for only a few feet in any direction.

They had not gone far when it became obvious that a concerted pursuit had begun. Armed Huitsenni everywhere were swarming down the notched poles into the boats. Soon they were rowing about in all directions, flashing their lights, poking their oars into dark corners, and sending swimmers with knives gripped in their toothless gums, to explore the narrow places where the boats could not enter.

At first it was not so difficult for San Thoy to avoid the searchers, but as they became more numerous his cunning was put more and more to the test. Time and again the three fugitives were compelled to hide behind piling while boatloads of searchers passed within a few feet of them. Although he had no opportunity to question him, Grandon judged that he was making for some definite hiding-place because, despite the many twists and turns to which he was forced by their pursuers, he continued to lead his two companions always in the same general direction.

Presently, however, the three came to a place where it seemed that they would be able to advance no farther. Completely surrounded by the man-hunters, and likely to be spied at any moment, they took refuge in the dark shadows of a cluster of piling. Lights flashed all about them, and when the beams came uncomfortably close, they submerged until they had passed.

One by one, however, the boats gradually drew off, until but one remained. It contained two pirates, naked save for leather breech-clouts. One of them, having flashed his light among the piles, nudged his companion and said something that Grandon and the two with him were unable to hear. But his actions were eloquent of his meaning, for the next moment he and his fellow, with long knives gripped in their mouths, slid into the water and silently swam toward the place of refuge occupied by the three fugitives.

SO QUIETLY had the pirates entered the water and so noiselessly were they approaching the clump of piling, that had it not been for their light, which still shone from the prow of the boat, the fugitives would not have been aware of their coming. As it was, they were warned, but it seemed that there was little they could do, as not one of them was armed. To stand and fight seemed foolhardy, and to attempt to escape, worse than useless, for by shouting, the two man-hunters

could quickly draw hundreds of their companions to cut off their escape.

In this dilemma, Grandon, as was his wont, thought swiftly and acted with celerity. As he saw it, there was but one way out, and if that failed they were doomed. Accordingly, he whispered rapid instructions to his two companions, and they took their places.

As the two pirates stealthily approached the clump of piles, they suddenly saw, directly in the path of the light from their boat, the face of San Thoy. He gave one frightened look at them and turned, swimming rapidly in the opposite direction. With grunts of satisfaction, the two swimmers struck out after him, naturally taking the shortest and most direct route, which lay between two large posts about five feet apart. Their cat-like eyes gleamed with the excitement of the chase. But just as they reached the space between the two large posts, two white arms shot out from behind them and jerked the long knives from their mouths. Two keen blades flashed aloft, and swiftly descended. Two greasy corpses slipped from sight into the black depths.

Grandon and Kantar, treading water, thrust the blades into their belts as San Thoy returned, grinning broadly.

"Now," he said, "we can travel by boat."

The three fugitives quickly clambered aboard. Two six-pronged fishing-spears lay along the gunwale, and in the back of the boat was a pile of nets.

Beneath these Grandon and Kantar crept. San Thoy removed his insignia which proclaimed him a mojak of the Royal Navy, stripping himself down to his breech-clout. Then, looking much like one of the fishermen of Huitsen, he rowed away.

Grandon lay in the bottom of the boat beside Kantar, covered by nets which were eloquently redolent of recent contact with defunct fish, for what he judged to be about half an hour. Then San Thoy stopped, secured the boat to a pile, and lifting the nets, said: "Come. Follow me, and make no noise."

He let himself quietly into the water, and the two followed him. Grandon saw that they were not far from the rear of one of the conical stone houses, and that several other boats were moored near by.

San Thoy led them to a point directly behind the house, and only a few feet from its circular stone walls. Then he said: "Grasp my belt, breathe deeply, and prepare to submerge."

With Grandon on one side and Kantar on the other, he then dived. Opening his eyes under water, Grandon saw a light glimmering some distance below them. They swam straight toward this light. Soon they were in front of an oval door of thick glass framed with metal, and looking into a small chamber, beyond which was another similar door through which the light streamed. San Thoy seized a knocker which hung behind the door, and struck it three times. A face appeared, framed in the oval door beyond —the face of a yellow man. San Thoy signaled to him with one hand, whereupon he pulled a lever, and the door before them opened. Swiftly they were carried in by a sudden rush of water, and the door closed behind them. Now they were in a narrow chamber, completely filled with water. Grandon was growing air-hungry, desperately so, and he saw from Kantar's expression that he was in like case. But San Thoy did not appear in the least discommoded by holding his breath for so long.

The man behind the second door scrutinized the three for a moment, then exchanged several more signs with San

Thoy and pulled a second lever, whereupon panels in the walls on both sides of them slid back, revealing large screened openings, and the water receded so swiftly that both Grandon and Kantar, taken unawares, sprawled on the floor. They sprang to their feet, thankfully inhaling great lungfuls of the moist air. Then the inner door opened, and the man who stood beside it bade them enter.

THEY stepped inside, and as the guard closed the door after them, San Thoy addressed him.

"Greetings, warder and brother Chispok. Are the brothers in secret session?"

"They are in secret session, O mojak of the brotherhood," replied the yellow man.

Grandon was astounded to hear these two Huitsenni addressing each other as brother Chispoks; for he knew that a chispok was a large, scaly rodent inhabiting the sea-shore or salt marshes and spending a considerable share of its time in the water, literally a rat of the sea—a sea-rat. It was a hideous creature, closely resembling its land cousin, the chispa, and its name was formed from the two words, "chispa" and "pok", the latter word meaning "the sea". Thus were formed the names "Azpok", or "Sea of Az", and "Ropok", or "Sea of Ro". To be called a chispa or a chispok in Reabon, or almost any other civilized country of Zorovia, was a deadly insult. But here were two men saluting each other as brother Chispoks without offense.

San Thoy continued his conversation with the guard.

"I have brought two recruits for our just and sacred cause, who came from the far land of Reabon," said San Thoy. "Your name, brother warder?"

"Fo San, brother mojak."

"And I am San Thoy. These are Grandon of Terra, Rogo of Uxpo and Torrogo of Reabon; and Kantar the Gunner, a citizen of Uxpo."

Fo San, apparently noting Grandon's sodden and bedraggled scarlet cincture for the first time, bowed low with right hand extended palm downward.

"The humble warder of the Chispoks salutes Your Majesty, the glory of whose deeds of valor has penetrated even to this remote corner of the world," he said.

Grandon returned the salute, and he and the gunner were invited to seat themselves.

"According to the rules of the order, you must await me here," said San Thoy. "I will go and speak to the romojak of the order. I am mojak of a lodge at the other end of the city. In the meantime, refreshments will be brought to you."

He walked to an oval metal door at the other end of the chamber and gave three sharp raps. It swung open, and ere it closed behind him, Grandon heard him exchange greetings with a yellow man on the other side.

A few minutes later, a boy came in, carrying a tray on which were bowls of steaming kova, grilled fish, and stewed mushrooms. Grandon and Kantar did full justice to the refreshments. While they sat there, eating and drinking, two members of the order were admitted to the chamber, and passed through into the room beyond.

Shortly after they had eaten and drunk their fill, San Thoy returned.

"I have spoken to Han Lay, Romojak of the order," he said, "and he and the brethren of this lodge have consented to admit you to our order, or, if you are unwilling to become members of the Chispoks, to permit you to depart in peace as you came."

"What are the requirements?" asked Grandon.

"You are to do all in your power to assist in the overthrow of the present regime in Huitsen," said San Thoy. "You are further to make solemn oath that you will never betray any of the secrets of the order to a non-member, and that you will render assistance to any brother Chispok in danger, even as you would have him render unto you."

"I can see no objections to these requirements," replied Grandon. "In fact, I rather like the idea of assisting to overthrow the present regime, which certainly has not conducted itself in a friendly manner toward me. What say you, Gunner?"

"I would gladly become a Chispok, or even a sneaking hahoe, did Your Majesty recommend it," replied Kantar.

"Then lead on," Grandon told San Thoy. "The sooner we can become Chispoks, and get down to the real business at hand, the better."

ONCE more San Thoy gave three sharp raps at the door. It was flung open by a bowing yellow man, and they found themselves in a short, narrow hallway. At the other end of this, a second door opened at the same signal, and they entered a circular room about twenty-five feet in diameter. Squatting on low stone benches around the wall were about sixty Huitsenni. A man, older and more corpulent than the others, sat cross-legged on a dais in the center of the room. San Thoy conducted his two friends before this individual, introducing Grandon and Kantar as he had in the antechamber, to Han Lay, romojak of the lodge.

Han Lay rose, and bowed low before Grandon with right hand extended palm downward.

"The order of Chispoks is supremely honored," he said, "in that Your Imperial and Illustrious Majesty has consented to become one of us. We labor in a cause just now, which we have reason to believe is your own, and feel that with so mighty a fighter and so sagacious a general on our side, our cause is all but won."

"May I inquire to what cause you refer," asked Grandon, "and why you consider your cause my own?"

"We Chispoks have spies everywhere," replied Han Lay. "We are, at present, endeavoring to overthrow Yin Yin, Rogo of Huitsen. Our spies inform us that he has not only kidnapped Her Majesty, your wife, for the purpose of selling her into slavery, but that, during the time she is to be kept in this city, he intends forcing her into his own seraglio."

"What!" Grandon's face went deathly pale, and upon his features there came a look which made even the brave Kantar feel anxious. Only twice before had he seen that look on the face of the Earthman, and each time enemies had fallen before his flashing blade like frella grass at harvest.

"If you will but take me within sight of this filthy beast you call Yin Yin," said Grandon, "I will pierce his putrid heart, even though a thousand guardsmen surround him."

Han Lay grinned.

"That, Your Majesty, is precisely what we intend that you shall do," he said. "The Rogo of Huitsen is so strongly guarded that none of our assassins has been able to reach him, but we have every faith in your ability. When you have sworn the oaths of our order, the brothers will conduct you to the palace. Others will smuggle you into a chamber where, sooner or later, you will meet Yin Yin, face to face."

"Administer the oath quickly, then," replied Grandon, "that I may be on my way."

Kneeling, and with their right hands extended, palms downward, toward a

small image of Thorth, which Han Lay held up before them, Grandon and Kantar swore the secret and terrible oath of the Chispoks.

The oath concluded, they arose, and the brethren crowded around them to extend fraternal greetings. But at this moment there came a sudden and unexpected interruption. One of the metal doors was thrown violently open, and a mojak with scarbo in hand and tork elevated to cover the group, burst into the room, followed by a horde of armed warriors.

The Chispoks were unarmed, save for their knives, hence at the mercy of the fully armed invaders, all of whom had torks and scarbos.

"You are all under arrest for treason against His Majesty, Yin Yin of Huitsen," proclaimed the mojak. "Throw down your knives and advance, one at a time, to have your wrists bound. Resist, and you are dead men."

Grandon noticed that Han Lay was edging toward a metal rod which projected through the floor of the dais. A moment later he stepped on it. There followed a sudden roar of rushing waters, which, in a brief instant, engulfed both the Chispoks and the Rogo's men, and filled the room to the ceiling. Choking and strangling, Grandon was swept off his feet. Then his head collided with something hard and metallic, and he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 12

IN THE SERAGLIO

AFTER the two guards led Vernia from the presence of Yin Yin, Rogo of Huitsen, they conducted her through a series of hallways to a spiral ramp, which they forced her to climb to a height of what she judged to be about six stories above the floor level of the throne room. Here, after threading several more hallways, they came to a metal door, on either side of which stood a tall, thin yellow man leaning on an immense scarbo. These were the first thin Huitsenni she had ever seen, and the sight astounded her, for she had believed that all of them, both men and women, were short and corpulent.

As Vernia and her two guards came to a stop before the door, one of those who stood beside it tapped on its metal surface with the hilt of his huge scarbo. It was instantly flung open, and a yellow man, taller than those who stood beside the door, and so aged that his face was a network of wrinkles, stood before them. He wore a purple cincture, showing that he was of the nobility, and his accouterments blazed with jewels. Seeing that Vernia wore the scarlet of royalty, he bowed low with right hand extended palm downward. Then he addressed the guard on her left.

"Whom have we here, and what are the commands?"

"O, Ho Sen, Lord of the Seraglio, this is Vernia, Torroga of Reabon. It is the command of His Majesty that Ufa be instructed to prepare her this night for the royal visit, for it may be that our gracious sovereign will honor her with the light of his presence."

"His Majesty is merciful, just and generous, and we delight to do his bidding," responded Ho Sen. Then he clapped his hands, and two more tall, slender Huitsenni came forward. They took the places of the two warriors who stood beside her, and the latter turned and marched off down the hall.

"Enter, Your Majesty," Ho Sen invited, with a ceremonious bow. The strangely angular creatures at Vernia's sides seized her arms to drag her forward. But she shook them off and entered, her-

self. There was nothing else to do. Then the metal door clanged shut behind her.

Ho Sen led the way across this room through another oval entrance, and down a hallway into an immense chamber two stories in height, and shaped like a crescent, the far end of which was invisible from where they stood. On the inner side of the crescent, numerous doors led out to little balconies which evidently overlooked the throne room, for Vernia could see the iridescent crystal walls of the immense shaft beyond. On the outer side of the crescent other doors led to sleeping-apartments.

In the immense room were gathered no less than a thousand girls and young women. Among them were represented all the races of Zorovia with which Vernia was familiar, and several of which she had never heard. It was notable, too, that every girl, judged by the standards of her race, was beautiful.

Save for the tall, lean guards who stood at the doorways, and at regular intervals around the walls, there were no men present, and Vernia was beginning to suspect that even these were not men. Young slave-girls padded softly about on the thick rugs, carrying trays of sweetmeats, pots and tiny bowls of kova, jars and bottles of cosmetics, combs, brushes, bangles, and such other feminine odds and ends as the pampered inmates of the seraglio required. Birds sang in gold and crystal cages that swung from the ceiling, and fountains splashed musically into limpid pools in which swam curious, brilliantly colored fish of many shapes and hues. In lieu of flowers, for such things are unknown on Zorovia, there were potted fungi of ornate shapes and rich shades, which filled the air with sweet, heavy perfume. These fungi, Vernia afterward learned, had been brought to their present state of perfection through careful selective breeding and crossing by hundreds of generations of skilled botanists. There were also many rare and beautiful varieties of ferns, cycads and jointed grasses.

Many of the inmates lolled about on low divans, chatting, sipping kova and nibbling at sweetmeats. Others were having their hair combed, their nails polished, or cosmetics applied by slave-girls. A few were stringing beads or doing embroidery work, and the remainder strolled about the place or gathered in little groups, laughing and talking.

With a pompous dignity which showed that he took considerable pride in the grave responsibility reposed in him by the Rogo, Ho Sen picked his way among the divans, ottomans, fountains, potted plants and concubines, while Vernia, following with her two guards, felt as if on parade. It was plain to her that she was immediately the center toward which all eyes gravitated, as well as the subject of many remarks and discussions. The various members of this assorted aggregation of feminine pulchritude showed different reactions as Vernia, who was far more beautiful than any of them, passed. Some gazed in open admiration, some cast lowering glances that plainly denoted jealousy, others appeared coldly indifferent, and a small remainder, evidently mindful of the fate intended for her, looked sympathetic. Accustomed to being stared at, she passed among them with easy grace and quiet dignity, ignoring them as completely as if they had been so many articles of furniture. But she could not help overhearing what some of them said. Many exclaimed at her beauty. Others, the jealous ones, made spiteful remarks. And she heard one girl say: "Another princess, and as great a beauty as the first. It seems that

the Rogo has lately spread his nets for naught but royalty."

HAVING passed about half-way around the crescent, Ho Sen led Vernia into a private suite, where a young girl sat having her hair done by an old and extremely ugly yellow woman. The girl, she noticed, wore the scarlet of royalty. She was small, shapely, black-haired and brown-eyed.

Ho Sen addressed the old woman.

"I bring another great lady for your ministrations, Ufa. She is Vernia, Torroga of Reabon. It is the will of His Majesty that she be prepared for the royal visit this night."

The old trot grinned. "We all love and obey our generous, just and gracious sovereign," she replied, "and Ufa will exert herself to the utmost that this damsel may be pleasing to His Majesty's eyes; though, in truth, her natural beauty makes the task an easy one."

Ho Sen went out, closing the door after him.

The old hag grinned hideously at Vernia.

"Be seated, my pretty one," she said, "until I have finished with my little white bird."

Vernia seated herself on a near-by divan, and a young slave-girl brought her a steaming pot of kova and a tiny golden drinking-bowl, which she placed near her on a small taboret. The girl who was having her hair done smiled and spoke to her.

"I am Narine of Tyrhana, Your Majesty," she said, "and, like you, a prisoner here. Shall we be friends? I've heard so much about your remarkable adventures, and your gallant husband, Grandon of Terra, that I feel as if I almost know you."

Vernia returned her friendly smile. "I who am friendless in this place," she replied, "would welcome the chance to acquire almost any friend, but in any case, I should be glad for the friendship of the daughter of Ad of Tyrhana, comrade of my father on many of his adventurous hunting-excursions, his staunch ally when seven great nations combined and sought to break the naval power of Reabon, and now the ally of my husband. You are the Torrogina?"

"No, I am but the Torrogini. My elder sister, Loralie, is the Crown Princess. Perhaps you have heard of her engagement to Zinlo, Torrogo of Olba."

"I have. He visited Grandon of Terra a short time ago, and told us about their romance, but he did not mention that she was the Torrogina. You know they both traveled to this planet from Mignor at the same time, Grandon alighting in Uxpo, and Zinlo, who on Mignor was known as Harry Thorne, in Olba. But tell me, how do you happen to be here? Can it be that some lascivious torrogo has also offered the price of an empire for your abduction?"

"I think not, as I expect to be sold into slavery today to the Rogo of the White Ibbits, a race of hairy barbarians who inhabit the Mountains of Eternal Snow near the south pole. It seems that Yin Yin, Rogo of Huitsen, buys large quantities of zandars from this savage chieftain, and that the latter has a weakness for comely virgins. Yin Yin has kept me here, unharmed, for the past ten days, for the sole reason that he believes I will bring him a tremendous price in zandars from this antarctic ruler.

"But you asked how I happened to be here. About an endir ago I left Tyrhana in one of my father's battleships to visit my cousin Tinia, daughter of Aardvan of Adonijar. Three days out, a tremendous storm came up, carrying our masts and sails and more than half the crew

overboard, destroying the steering apparatus and nearly filling the hold with water. In this helpless condition we drifted for many days. Then we sighted a fleet of pirate vessels. After a brief skirmish with the few warriors who were left behind on our ship, they boarded us and took all who remained alive prisoners. I was brought here, either to be sold or impressed into the seraglio of Yin Yin. He has seen fit to offer me to the barbarian for a fabulous number of zandars. I have sought to bribe Yin Yin to return me to my father, but he would not. Perhaps I can bribe the hairy chieftain. If not, why then I will die by my own hand, for the women of Tyrhana have ever preferred death to dishonor."

Vernia, in her turn, related what had befallen her since her capture by the Huitserni.

In the meantime, Ufa finished with Narine's coiffure. Then she conducted Vernia into a magnificent bath of black and yellow marble, where she bathed in scented water, and was massaged with aromatic oils by two slave-girls under the supervision of the efficient Ufa. After this, another slave-girl brought splendid garments suited to her rank, and helped her to dress.

BACK in the boudoir, Vernia had her hair done by Ufa. Presently Narine came in, and slave-girls brought their evening meal. The repast was a sumptuous one, consisting of nearly a hundred tastily prepared dishes, from which they chose what they wanted. The napery was of scarlet silk, each piece embroidered with the coat of arms of the Rogo of Huitsen, and the service was of gold, similarly decked.

After they had dined, Ufa led them to another, larger room, the reception room of the suite, where a slave-girl served them with kova. Then she departed, leaving them to their own devices.

With Ufa and the other slaves about, Vernia had kept the thought which was uppermost in her mind, escape, entirely out of the conversation. But now that she and the Princess Narine were alone, she hoped that the Tyrhanian princess, having been in Huitsen for some time, might have acquired some knowledge which they could turn to their purpose.

"Don't you think," she said, as Narine filled her jeweled cup with steaming kova, "that you, with the wealth of Tyrhana behind you, could find some one in this palace, who, for a promise of vast riches, would smuggle us away in a small boat? Once at sea, we should be almost certain to encounter one of the many ships that must, by now, be searching for both of us."

Narine sipped her kova thoughtfully. "I have tried that," she replied, "and have everywhere met with rebuffs. Every person I have tried to bribe has informed against me, and Yin Yin lost no time in letting me know that I was only wasting my breath."

"Can it be," asked Vernia, "that these people so love their tyrannous Rogo that not one of them would betray him for the wealth of an empire?"

"On the contrary," Narine replied, "I believe that every subject, from the most exalted noble to the lowest slave, fears and hates him. Yet no man dares speak his mind, for fear his fellow is a spy, or will turn informer to further his own ends."

"What of the man who has charge of the seraglio? Ho Sen, I believe they called him."

"The man, did you say?" Narine smiled. "Ho Sen is no man, but like these other angular creatures who stand about, leaning on huge scarbos, is but a eunuch."

"A eunuch wearing the purple? That is strange. And I noticed that none of them were short and fat like the Huitsenni, although otherwise resembling them."

"They are all sons of slave-women, mostly of the white races, so Ufa told me," Narine replied. "Some of them, I understand, are Yin Yin's own sons. Ho Sen is Yin Yin's uncle, though the Rogo does not acknowledge the relationship, and was granted the purple by Yin Yin's grandfather. He has been Lord of the Seraglio for three generations of royalty."

"Indeed! And does he love these yellow rulers who are the cause of his affliction and that of his fellows, so well that he could not be bribed to serve us?"

"I doubt that he loves his master any more than the others, yet I could not bribe him. I tried the first day I was brought here."

"Then there is no way we can help ourselves?"

"There is but one," replied Narine. "It is a desperate way, to be put into practise only as a last resort. But it is efficient. Look."

She twisted a blood-red jewel from a ring on her finger, and Vernia saw a few white crystals reposing in a tiny hollow beneath it.

"One of these crystals dissolved on the tongue brings death, sudden, sure and painless," Narine told her. Then, as she returned the jewel to its place, she said: "Yin Yin is careful to keep all weapons out of the seraglio, with the exception of the huge scarbos carried by the eunuchs. If he but knew the secret of this ring, then would my last hope indeed be gone."

"I, too, have managed to preserve the means to a quick way out, if worse comes to worst." Vernia drew a small, keen knife from beneath her garments and held it up. "This is from the belt of one of the guards who brought me to the seraglio. I managed to transfer it to these clothes after my bath, but it was difficult with the old hag and the slave-girls watching."

Scarcely had she spoken, ere there was a slight rustle of the hangings behind her. Then a fat, heavily jeweled hand reached over her shoulder and snatched the knife from her, and Yin Yin himself, with a wheezy chuckle, waddled into the room. Still chuckling, and before she could prevent him, he seized Narine's slender wrist, and twisted the ring with the blood-red jewel from her finger. Then he dropped both articles into his belt pouch, poured himself a cup of kova, and sat down heavily.

"My, my!" he wheezed, grinning toothlessly. "What desperate characters we have been entertaining unawares! Poison! Weapons! Bribery! I'm surprized. I'm astounded. I'm shocked."

He tossed off his kova and refilled the jeweled cup.

Narine said nothing, but there was a look of horror in her brown eyes.

Vernia, calm mistress of her emotions, regarded him with regal hauteur. "I perceive," she said, addressing Narine, "that the Rogo of Huitsen has a multitude of low occupations. Not content with being a mere thief, robber and defiler of womanhood, he is also that most contemptible of creatures, a spy."

Yin Yin set down his cup with a grunt of surprize, and his cat-like eyes narrowed. "Have a care, slave, how you speak of your master," he snarled, "or he may decide to have you whipped."

Still looking at Narine, Vernia replied. "Observe, Your Highness, how manly and chivalrous is the Rogo of Huitsen. Ah, what a different song he will sing when Grandon of Terra has him by the throat! He has a throat, I am sure, even

though it is concealed beneath his multiplicity of chins."

"It may be, Your Majesty," replied Narine, taking the cue, "that he has a throat, but is ashamed of it."

"Or what is more likely, Your Highness," Vernia responded, "he is afraid some honest man will slit it."

Yin Yin, arrayed in all his finery, had come to play the lover. But the most ardent wooer can seldom withstand ridicule, and if he be short-tempered and accustomed to having his every wish regarded as law, it is more than likely that anger will quickly crowd the gentler passions from his bosom. Knowing this, Vernia had deliberately set out to bait him. It was evident, at first, that she had succeeded even beyond her expectations, for the bloated face of the monarch grew livid. A greenish glitter came to his catlike eyes, and he muttered horrible threats. But Yin Yin, although gross and sensual, was a master of intrigue and an adept in cunning. And not many moments elapsed before he saw through the ruse. Suddenly he ceased his muttering and began laughing uproariously—laughing until the tears coursed down his puffy cheeks. After all, was he not complete master of the situation? And mere words, no matter what their burden, could not injure him.

With a pudgy finger he wiped the tears from his cheeks. Then he gulped down his kova, replaced the cup on the taboret, and shook that same fat finger at Vernia.

"Bones of Thorth, but you will be the death of me yet with your subtle humor," he wheezed. "A wittier pair of young ladies I have not seen in many a year—I who see thousands yearly, who come and go with the seasons."

From that moment on, he retained his appearance of good humor, nor could they with their keenest sallies or deepest insults penetrate the armor of jollity which he had assumed. A greasy, pleasure-bloated, jewel-bedizened monstrosity, he sat there, chuckling, boasting, and drinking cup after cup of steaming kova until the pot was empty and a slave-girl was summoned with more.

THE girl had just departed when there was the thunder of many hoofs on the planking of the street below. Yin Yin, with a maudlin smirk, addressed Narine. "If the Torrogini of Tyrhana will look over the balcony," he said, "it is possible that she will catch a glimpse of her future master. My ears tell me that Heg, Rogo of the Ibbits, has arrived with his savage riders, and ten thousand zandars for which I have offered to forego the pleasure of taming that little she-marmelot, the daughter of Ad of Tyrhana."

Both girls rushed to the nearest window and stepping out on the balcony peered over. In the courtyard below them was an immense concourse of riders, mounted on zandars, wearing cloaks and hoods of zandar skins, and carrying long lances in their hands. But such lances! Each had about fifteen feet of stout wooden shaft, and a spiral head about two feet in length, connected to a globular metal knob. Vernia, herself a leader of warriors, was puzzled as to how these strange lances could be used, as it appeared that the spiral heads, instead of penetrating deeply when thrust at an enemy, would only spring back at the arm that drove them. The riders also carried scarbos and knives, but she saw no torks or evidence of firearms of any kind.

The faces and bodies of the riders were so muffled in their hoods and cloaks as to be invisible from above. The majority kept to their saddles, but about twenty of them dismounted and entered the palace. And looking out beyond the courtyard,

Vernia saw by the light of the street lamps that an entire street, reaching from the palace to one of the city gates, was filled by an immense herd of milling, bellowing zandars, kept in formation by mounted Ibbits who prodded the recalcitrant beasts with the butts of their queer, spiral-pointed lances.

Turning away from the balcony, the two girls re-entered the room. Yin Yin, now evidently well under the influence of the kova he had consumed, was mumbling kerra spores and expectorating the red juice into one of the sand-jars. His multiple chins stood much in need of the attentions of the royal chin-wiper, but he seemed too far gone in drink to notice this detail. He looked up suddenly as three sharp raps sounded at a side door.

"Come," he said, thickly.

Ho Sen, Lord of the Seraglio, entered, and bowed low with right hand extended palm downward.

"Your Majesty," he said, "Heg, Rogo of the Ibbits, has arrived, and awaits your pleasure at the outer door of the seraglio."

"Send him here by way of the single corridor, and see that two eunuchs attend him to this door," Yin Yin commanded. "There let them wait within call. It may be that this barbarian, when confronted with so much beauty at one time, will become difficult to manage."

"I hasten to obey," replied Ho Sen, with another bow, and departed.

A few moments later the same door opened, and there entered a being who elicited from Vernia an involuntary gasp of amazement. With his hood of zandar thrown back and his great cloak of the same material caught at his shoulders, Heg, Rogo of the Ibbits, was a most remarkable sight. He was tall, towering head and shoulders above Yin Yin, and symmetrically built so far as human standards go, with the exception of his arms, which were not only tremendously muscled, but as long as those of an ape. His features, too, were regular, and his teeth even and white. Save for his scarlet cincture, and the gold and jewel studded straps which supported his knife and scarbo, he wore no clothing beneath his cloak, nor did he appear to need any. For his entire body, from head to foot, not excepting his whole face, was covered with short, white fur.

YIN YIN rose, as is the universal custom in Zorovia when royalty receives royalty, and the two exchanged salutations with right hands extended palms downward. Then he ceremoniously presented the savage chieftain to "Her Imperial Majesty, Vernia, Torroga of Reabon," and "Her Imperial Highness, Narine, Torrogini of Tyrhana." Neither Vernia nor Narine acknowledged the introduction, but this seemed to make no difference to the two rulers, who promptly seated themselves beside the taboret.

Yin Yin poured kova for himself and his guest and they drank. Then he said: "Well, Heg, have you brought the zandars?"

"Aye, Yin Yin," was the reply. "Ten thousand of the most powerful and spirited beasts in my rogat are even now pawing the planks of your city in charge of my best herdsmen."

"You are satisfied with the bargain?"

Heg looked at Narine appraisingly. She shuddered under his gaze, but this did not seem to impress him. He had evidently seen many other maidens similarly frightened.

"I am quite satisfied, Yin Yin," he answered. "Come, look at the splendid zandars I have brought you, and see if you can find it in your heart to tell me that you are not pleased."

He rose and led the way to the balcony, Yin Yin waddling after him.

"What think you of those beasts?" he asked. "And all for one little slave-girl."

Yin Yin rubbed his pudgy hands together as the two turned away from the balcony and stepped back into the room. "They are indeed fine animals," he admitted, "and I declare myself satisfied, but speak not disparagingly of the little slave-girl. Remember, she is the daughter of a mighty torrogo, and it cost me many men and much treasure to bring her here. Moreover, she has beauty far above the average."

"What of this other?" asked Heg, as they sat down once more beside the kova. "She also has great beauty, and I would buy her from you. In fact, each of these reaches the pinnacle of beauty for her type, the one brunette and the other blond."

"Your taste in feminine charms is admirable," said Yin Yiin, "as well it may be, seeing the number of famous beauties you have had from me. But you have always stipulated maids, and she of the golden curls is the bride of a torrogo, as you may have surmised from her title."

"Maid or matron, I care not. For beauty such as hers, I will break my rule. Ten thousand zandars more will be yours, magnificent as those I have brought you, in exchange for the golden-haired one."

"Nay, Heg. She is not for sale. All the zandars in your rogat, or all the countless millions that roam the antarctic wastes could not buy her, for she has already been sold for the value of a dozen kingdoms. It but remains for me to deliver her and collect my price."

But Heg was not easily turned from his purpose. Having seen Vernia, he meant to have her, arguing, threatening, pleading, and gradually increasing his offers, while the two drank cup after cup and pot after pot of kova. He at length avowed his willingness to fill all the streets of Huitsen, packed solidly to the doorways, with zandars, if Yin Yin would only sell him this delectable bit of femininity that, as he expressed it, he might turn at will from the dark beauty of the one to the blond glory of the other.

MEANWHILE the two girls, who had retired to a corner of the room, whispered together.

"Never, in my wildest fancies," said Vernia, "did I ever dream that I should become the subject of such haggling as this—to be sold, offered for sale, or bidden for, like a beast of burden."

"It all seems like a wild nightmare, too horrible to be real," replied Narine. "Think of it! I have been sold by a greasy rodent to a fur-covered savage—I the daughter of Ad of Tyrhana! Oh that I had kept the secret of the ring intact! Now I fear that death will come too late to save my honor."

"My deepest regret is that I, too, betrayed my secret by displaying the knife. I could at least have had the pleasure of sheathing it in the foul heart of Yin Yin before employing it to still for ever the beating of my own. I have but one hope on which to lean, and that is a slender one. Grandon of Terra is free somewhere in this city, or was when last I heard of him. Though he and Kantar the Gunner, his friend and warrior, were unarmed, they may have found a way to obtain weapons. If so, it will take more guards than Yin Yin possesses to keep them from the palace, for they must know that I have been brought here."

"It is indeed a slender hope," sighed Narine; "for even though your gallant husband could win his way to this place, there would be no way out. It would be but a death-trap for all of us."

"In that case," Vernia replied, "I should die contented, for there would be hordes of enemies to accompany us into

the great beyond and stand before the judgment throne of Thorth."

As the two rogos reached an advanced state of inebriation, their haggling became louder and louder, until it appeared that a quarrel was imminent. Suddenly, the hand of the savage chieftain flew to the hilt of his scarbo, and he sprang to his feet, overturning a taboret. "Sell me this fair-haired beauty, and name your own price," he shouted, "but sell her to me you shall, or by the blood of Thorth I'll slay you and take her for nothing."

Yin Yin looked at him in drunken wonderment for a moment, as if he could not believe his own eyes. Then he clapped his hands. Instantly the door through which the hairy one had come, flew open, and two eunuchs ran into the room, bared blades in their hands.

At this, Heg's bravado instantly subsided. Letting his furry hand drop from his hilt, he said: "What's this? You call the guard? I did but jest, my friend."

"Your jest, as you are pleased to call it, has gone far enough," wheezed Yin Yin. "We will, however, let it pass as such, and so end the conference. Take your slave-girl and be gone, for the Torroga of Reabon and I would be alone." He turned his cat-like eyes on Vernia, and leered drunkenly. "Wouldn't we, my pretty?"

"It grows late, and I must indeed be going," replied Heg. Striding across the room, he suddenly seized Narine's wrist and jerked her to her feet. She screamed, and attempted to free her arm from his brutal grasp, but he only laughed at her struggles. "Come, my little beauty," he said, dragging her across the room. "We have outworn our welcome."

One of the eunuchs held the door open, and the other stood aside for them to pass out. Yin Yin, a kerra-stained grin on his porcine features, rose ponderously, and waddled unsteadily toward Vernia, drunkenly oblivious to her expression of fear and loathing.

CHAPTER 13

GRANDON MEETS YIN YIN

After Grandon struck his head and lost consciousness in the water-filled lodge room of the Chispoks, his senses returned slowly. At first it seemed that he was in a vast hall—that a gigantic figure was bending over him, shouting something which he could hear only as a faint sound in the distance, and that other immense figures were moving about the room.

But gradually, as he became more rational, the room and everything in it assumed their proper proportions. He saw that he was lying on a sleeping-shelf in a room much smaller than that in which he had lost consciousness, and that the supposed giant was Kantar the Gunner, leaning over him. The other occupants of the room were Han Lay, San Thoy, and a half-dozen Chispoks.

"Speak to me, Majesty," Kantar was saying. "Only let me know that you——"

"I'm all right, Gunner. Let me up." With the astounded and delighted Kantar's arm beneath his shoulders, he sat up. His head swam dizzily, but gradually it cleared. "Where are we?" he asked.

Han Lay, who had hurried to his bedside as soon as he saw him sit up, bowed and said: "Perhaps I can explain better than the warrior, Your Majesty. You recall that we were attacked by the Rogo's soldiers in the lodge room?"

"I remember that, and the flood afterward. Then I must have struck my head, for all went black."

"I tried to help you," continued Han Lay, "but as you were not expecting the

rush of waters you were swept off your feet and carried away before I could reach you. Your head collided with the end of a doorway. All the Chispoks, of course, knew how to get out, for we had rehearsed it many times. San Thoy helped your warrior to escape through the secret door and I dragged you out the same way. The last man out closed it."

"Then the Rogo's warriors did not escape?"

"Not one man. But of course it was necessary for us to destroy the building, for there will be an investigation, and we have other buildings similarly equipped. All this was prepared for in advance. The pulling of a lever in this house set off a tremendous charge of explosive which blew the place to atoms. We brought you here to my home, in my boat."

Grandon stood up to test the strength of his legs. Although the dizziness assailed him for a second time, he was able to stay on his feet.

"Permit me to thank you for saving my life," he said. "It may be that some day I shall find a way to repay you."

"You can best repay me by carrying out the plans we outlined before you took the oath of our fraternity."

"I'll gladly do that, and more," replied Grandon. "Give me my instructions, and let me start."

"You will have little to do until the brothers who will smuggle you into the palace bring you face to face with Yin Yin. If you succeed in slaying him and rescuing Her Majesty, your wife, the Chispoks will not only guarantee to help you escape from the palace by the way you entered, but will further promise to conduct you out of Huitsen and place you aboard a seaworthy craft on the Azpok, with provisions and water sufficient to last you until you reach the shores of your own land. Is this agreeable?"

"Perfectly," Grandon replied. "But I would be fair with you as you have been with us. What of the secret way into Huitsen which I and my warrior now know? Would you expect us to keep this secret from the rest of Zorovia, in spite of the relentless raids and acts of outlawry which will no doubt continue to be perpetrated by your people?"

"We have provided against that, also," replied Han Lay, "for we are aware that any one of the twelve great nations of Zorovia, knowing where we are, could easily wipe out Huitsen. However, permit me to point out that, even though you saw the secret passageway and how it was operated, you were not navigating the ship; hence you have no idea just where it is. You saw that the entrance was through a fiord, but there are countless thousands of fiords on this coast, many of which look like this one. All we will need to do will be to blindfold you and those who are to go with you, until you are at sea and out of sight of land. The brothers will then direct you how to sail to reach your own country, but you will not be able to find our particular fiord again in many years of careful searching, unless it be by accident or unusual good luck.

"I might say, further, that in the event of the Chispoks succeeding to the point of taking over the government, piracy will be stopped, peace treaties will be signed with all the great nations of Zorovia, and Huitsen will be thrown open to the ships of the world. It was for this principle that the Chispoks were organized. The Huitsenni have been pirates for countless generations. Once our nation was as great and powerful as any on Zorovia, but now we are among the least of the powers. Why? The Chispoks hold that commerce has made other nations

greater than our own. By the very nature of our livelihood we are debarred from peaceful trading, or commerce of any kind with the exception of an occasional kidnapping for some lascivious ruler, infrequent ransom money for wealthy or influential people captured on the high seas, and the little we can get for our plunder in trade goods from those shady and grasping merchants who run the double risk of dealing with us—first because they fear we may betray them, and second because they may be apprehended and punished by their own people. Naturally they exact exorbitant profits, and our ill-gotten plunder never brings us a tenth of its real worth in exchange.

"The Chispoks are sick of piracy, of this secret slinking from the sight of other nations as the hahoe slinks from the path of the mighty marmelot. We are weary of the constant bloodshed which is a part of our trade. And it is our ambition to place Huitsen on a peaceful footing with all Zorovia, to turn our pirate vessels into merchantmen, to have our people received with friendship and good will whenever they set foot on a foreign shore."

"A worthy ambition, and I'll do all I can to further it," said Grandon.

"Good. And now do you feel strong enough to leave for the palace?"

"Perfectly."

HAN LAY led Grandon and Kantar to his private arsenal, from which each selected a scarbo, knife, tork and ammunition. When both were armed he walked with them to the door, and said: "The six brothers here will take you to the palace. They have their instructions, and you may trust them implicitly."

Looking out, Grandon saw that the six Chispoks, attired as fishermen, were standing in a semicircle, which screened the door and the fishing-hole beside it, from view.

"Crouch behind the men and descend the ladder," Han Lay said. "There are two boats moored below. Each of you is to get into one and wrap himself in a fishing-net. Farewell, and may Thorth guide and keep you."

Grandon did as directed, and Kantar followed close behind him. Scarcely had they established themselves in the boats ere three pseudo-fishermen descended into each, and rowed them away.

Lying in the bottom of the boat, looking up through the meshes of the net, Grandon could see but little. The light from the street lamps shone faintly through the interstices in the planking above his head, and by means of it he could barely make out the outlines of piling and the foundations of the buildings they passed. At times the rowers saluted, and were saluted by the crews of other small fishing-boats, but otherwise they maintained unbroken silence.

Presently Grandon saw an immense stone foundation looming ahead of them and stretching to the right and left farther than he could see, in so wide an arc that he knew it must be the base of some tremendous building. Then the prow of the boat in which he rode slid up on a low dock. A moment later he heard another prow grind up beside it. Then one of the pseudo-fishermen spoke.

"Greetings, thalput of the royal kitchens."

"Greetings, fishermen," was the reply. "Have you brought the fish, as ordered?"

"The fish are here in the nets."

"Then bring them, and follow me."

STILL wrapped in the net, Grandon was swung to the shoulders of the three men, who walked across a low dock and entered a large oval door. After follow-

ing a dimly lighted passageway for some distance, they suddenly turned aside into a narrow doorway. A moment later, the other three strode in after them, and the door was softly closed. Grandon was set on his feet, and the folds of the net were unwound from his body. As soon as Kantar was similarly freed, the six pseudo-fishermen took their nets and departed, closing the door after them.

They were in a tiny room, faintly lighted by a single dim bulb that shone from the center of the ceiling. The place had metal walls and was bare of furniture. No outlet was visible save the door through which they had come. But he who had been addressed as the kitchen thalput, pressed one of a row of studs, whereupon a panel slid back, revealing the bottom of a narrow spiral stairway, as dimly lighted as the room in which they stood.

"Follow me," he whispered, "and make no sound. Take care that your weapons do not clink against the walls."

As soon as Grandon and Kantar had stepped inside, the thalput pressed a stud and the panel closed behind them. Then he led the way up the spiral stairway. At intervals of about fifteen feet thereafter, they passed sliding panels, above each of which was fastened a dim bulb. When they had reached the ninth panel, the thalput stopped before it. He pressed a stud, and the panel slid back, revealing a dark opening behind scarlet hangings. From beyond these came the sound of spirited haggling. The thalput pressed a lower stud and the panel slid back once more without a sound, shutting off the noise of voices beyond. Then he addressed Grandon:

"In yonder room," he said, "you will find Her Majesty, your wife, the Rogo of Huitsen and the Rogo of the Ibbits. I gather from the conversation that the savage chieftain is trying to persuade Yin Yin to sell your wife to him. I leave you here to lay your plans as may seem best to you. If you succeed, you will find me at the foot of the steps, and the boats and fishermen will be ready to convey you hence. Farewell, brother Chispoks, and may Thorth guide your scarbos! Death to the tyrant!"

As the thalput began his descent of the stairs, Grandon said: "My plans are made, Gunner, and I want you to carry out your part as ordered, without giving heed to what may follow. I will go in and engage those two drunken rogos in combat. It will be your part to rescue my wife while I am so doing. My positive instructions to you are that, no matter what odds I may have to fight, no matter if you see me fall and at the mercy of my enemies, you must not join in the fight. Instead, bend every effort toward rescuing Her Majesty. Convey her down the stairway as soon as possible, and do not wait for me. Take one of the boats, and be off immediately, to the place of refuge which the Chispoks have prepared for us. If I live I will follow. If not, our chief object will have been accomplished —the rescue of my wife; and you will do your best to get her safely back to Reabon. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. But to see Your Majesty go down and not——"

"What! I was under the impression that a soldier was with me."

"But, Majesty——"

"A soldier obeys orders implicitly."

"Yes, Majesty."

"You will so obey."

"I will so obey, Majesty."

"Good. Wait here until you hear the clash of blades. Then enter, and carry out your instructions to the letter."

"To the letter, Majesty."

Grandon pressed the upper stud and

the panel slid open. A woman's scream and a man's voice saying: "Come, my little beauty, we have outworn our welcome," spurred him to instant action. Leaping through the panel, he flung the scarlet hangings wide and stepped into the room, bared blade in hand.

At a glance, he saw that he would would have four swordsmen to contend with instead of two. One eunuch held a door open while another stood opposite him. A tall, hairy fellow with a white fur cloak was dragging a pretty, brown-eyed girl toward the door. And the fat, greasy Rogo of Huitsen was waddling toward Vernia, grinning drunkenly.

At sight of Grandon, Vernia cried: "Bob! My dearest, I knew you would come!"

Yin Yin turned and whipped out his scarbo. Heg, Rogo of the Ibbits, dropped the arm of the brown-eyed girl and also drew his blade, leaping toward Grandon. The two eunuchs caught up their heavy weapons and followed. There was a clash of steel on steel. Yin Yin parried once and struck once. Then his head flew from his shoulders, thudded to the floor, and rolled beneath a divan. For an instant the headless body stood there, blood spouting from the neck as from a fountain. Then it collapsed, a quivering mound of flabby flesh.

GRANDON turned to face three blades. The brown-eyed princess, meanwhile, had run across the room to stand beside Vernia. Instead of waiting on guard, the Earth-man attacked with a brilliant display of that swordsmanship which had made him famous throughout all Zorovia. Before his fierce onslaught the three gave way. His blade seemed everywhere at once, flashing with the speed of lightning.

Heg was disarmed, almost with the second slash he made at Grandon, his weapon flying behind a divan. But he leaped nimbly back, then drawing his knife, strove to encircle the Earth-man, evidently for the purpose of knifing him in the back. Grandon guessed his intention, but was now so beset by the two eunuchs with their long, two-handed scarbos, that he could give the hairy chieftain but scant attention. Once, when he thought the savage rogo was just behind him, he slashed back for an instant with his scarbo, but the blade encountered only empty air, and he came near having his head split open by the nearest eunuch. He stepped aside just in time, and as the heavy blade crashed to the floor, its wielder received a thrust in the throat and followed his master into the great beyond. With this fellow out of the way Grandon quickly disposed of the other with a leg cut followed by a swift neck blow that sent the head of the slave to keep company with that of the master.

Whirling to face his furry enemy, Grandon was astounded to see that, save for himself and three corpses, the room was deserted. He instantly came to the conclusion that Kantar had rescued both Vernia and the strange, black-haired princess. But what, he wondered, had become of this furry fellow from the antarctic? Puzzled, he was about to return to the panel opening when he heard a cry —the voice of Vernia. "Bob! The window! Quickly!"

He leaped through the window and peered over the balcony railing. Below him he saw the hairy chieftain dropping with ape-like agility from balcony to balcony, using one arm to swing himself down and holding Vernia with the other. The courtyard below was packed with furry warriors mounted on zandars. One saddled beast was being led to a point just under the lowest balcony.

Sheathing his bloody starbo, and unmindful of the dizzy height, Grandon swung himself over the railing and began dropping from balcony to balcony. But before he was half-way down, the furry rogo was in the saddle, with Vernia, wrapped in a zandar cloak and swung across the bow. He gave a few swift orders, then galloped off. With the exception of one man, the entire cavalcade followed him. That man sat his mount beneath the lowest balcony, evidently left there to slay Grandon, for his long lance with its queer, corkscrew head was already pointed at the spot where the Earth-man would shortly alight.

While Kantar makes a desperate dash for liberty, believing he is rescuing Vernia, Grandon follows her new captor into the snowy antarctic wastes, where there is a terrible battle with the most formidable monster he has yet encountered. New and unexpected thrills await you in the next installment of this smashing serial, which will appear in the February issue of WEIRD TALES, *on sale January 1st*

The Dead Are in the Hillside Clay

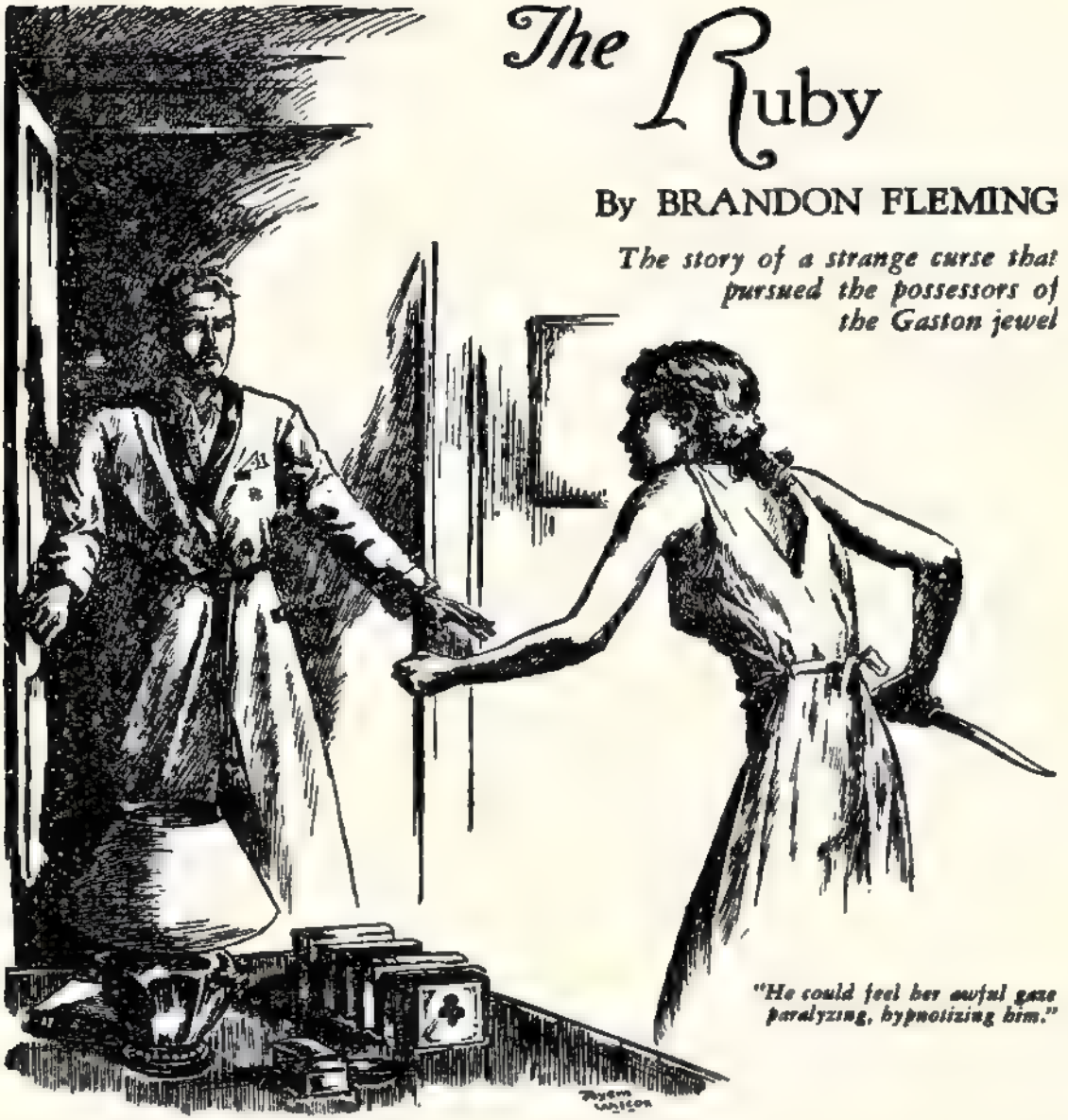
By ANTHONY F. KLINKNER

The dead are in the hillside clay,
  The dead are everywhere;
They languish in the petaled rose
  They float in summer air.
Their voice is in the blowing winds,
  And on the evening breeze,
Their presence in the singing birds
  And in the swinging trees.
The dead are in the memories
  Of those who know no rest;
They haunt us in the melodies
  Of songs we love the best.
It is the living who are chained
  In narrow paths to tread;
For freedom pure and unrestrained
  Is only for the dead!

The Ruby

By BRANDON FLEMING

The story of a strange curse that pursued the possessors of the Gaston jewel



"He could feel her awful gaze paralyzing, hypnotizing him."

MARY GASTON stood at the open French windows of the library at Shelcombe Hall, looking out into the hot still night. Occasional flickers of distant lightning showed up the black masses of the trees at the far end of the garden. The air was oppressive, full of the heavy scent of flowers. She turned back from the windows, and crossing to one of the bookcases, began searching in the drawers. Sir John Gaston, returning after seeing off the last guests of the evening, mixed himself a whisky and soda. He was a heavily built young man of about twenty-six, good-natured and easy-going, and if not overburdened with brains was rich enough to be beyond the necessity of possessing them.

"Looking for something, darling?"

She closed the last of the drawers and turned away.

"Where's the account of the Gaston Ruby?"

Sir John started. The soda water splashed over the edge of the glass he was holding to the siphon.

"Good Lord, I don't know. Who's been telling you about it?"

She went to another case.

"Your cousin Maud."

"Stupid nonsense," said Sir John. "Nobody believes that sort of rot nowadays. I've never even read about it myself." He brought the glass to the table. "No time for stuff like that in nineteen thirty-two."

"I simply *must* know all about it," she declared.

He looked at her adoringly. It was only three weeks since, at the end of their honeymoon, he had brought her to Shelcombe Hall, the historic old home of his family, and of all the lovely chatelaines it had known, there had been none more beautiful. She was a sweet, sunny-natured girl. Already she had endeared herself to every one. John Gaston was accounted a lucky fellow, and knew himself to be one.

She came across to him.

"It's too thrilling," she exclaimed, "to have married into a family with a real live curse. Please tell me the whole story at once."

He took out his pipe, and filled it.

"But, my dear girl, I don't know the bally story. Never bothered about it. There's a bundle of old papers about it somewhere here, but I've no idea where they are. Probably in that cupboard over there."

"I shan't think of going to bed," she said, "until I've heard all about it from beginning to end. See if the papers are there."

He shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"All right, I'll have a look. But it's all stuff and nonsense."

He went to the cupboard and began rummaging among the bundles of papers in it.

"Here we are. The ruby. Look out for the dust. It's filthy. Don't suppose they've been touched for years."

He went to the windows, and shook the dust off the package. Then he brought it to the table, and untying the tape, sorted out the papers.

SHE perched herself on the arm of his chair. The sheets of paper were old, and the writing on them so faded in parts as to be almost indecipherable. He selected a few, and put the others down.

"This looks like the beginning. I'll try to give you the sense of it. It's damned difficult to read. The death of Wilfred Gaston—what is it?—July 19, 1712. I'll have to give it in my own words. Can't read this stuff aloud. Here goes. Wilfred Gaston, who seems to have been a bit of a blob on the jolly old family escutcheon, came back from India with a marvelous ruby. He never would say exactly how he'd got it, but it was certain there'd been a spot of dirty work. There was something about robbing a temple and a priestess and some dreadful rites, and all that; but the only definite thing he'd say was that there was a pretty bad curse on the stone. He was a daredevil sort of fellow, and it seemed to amuse him. It certainly didn't trouble him at all then, but about a year later he came into the title and got married, and after that he sobered down a good deal, and became quite a model husband. He had a secret cupboard made in this room, locked the ruby away and said nothing about it, and everything was O. K. His wife was a beautiful woman, and they had two children. There was no hitch of any sort until, giving a dinner party in this house in celebration of the third or fourth anniversary of his wedding, I regret to say he got drunk. After dinner he

produced the ruby and showed it to his guests. It is said that some one there and then made him an offer for it, but in his drunken excitement he declared he wouldn't part with the curse for all the money in the country."

He paused to relight his pipe. In the distance there was a faint roll of thunder, and the lightning behind the trees had grown brighter. The air had become hotter and more oppressive.

"Go on," she said. "What happened after that?"

"What happened after that was that the next morning he was found lying dead on the floor in this room. He had been stabbed through the heart with an Oriental dagger which had been taken from among other ornaments on the mantelpiece. The most extraordinary part of the affair was that the secret hiding-place, where he had kept the ruby for four or five years, was open, and the ruby itself was lying on the middle of his forehead."

She uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Darling, it's a perfect thriller! I believe you're making it all up!"

"I'm not," he declared. "It's all here exactly as I'm telling you. He was wearing a dressing-gown over his night-dress, and slippers. For some reason or other he had got out of bed, without disturbing his wife, gone down to the library, and been murdered there."

"Perhaps he had heard some one moving about," she suggested.

"That's practically out of the question. You know yourself that from our bedroom it would be quite impossible to hear any one in this room away at the other side of the house."

"He might have heard some one passing the bedroom door."

"There was no one to pass. The only other people in the house were the servants in their own quarters. But wait until I've finished. The body was found by one of the women servants at six o'clock in the morning. The door was closed, and the windows were fastened. Nothing else had been disturbed or tampered with, and not a thing had been stolen. Lady Gaston's maid ran upstairs, and found her just awake, wondering why on earth her husband had got up so early."

She was silent while he drained his glass.

"But whoever killed him must have been able to open the secret hiding-place and take out the ruby. Where was the key?"

"That," said Sir John, "is the question I should have expected from a bright girl like you. And here's the answer all ready. The key was kept in a spring panel in an old writing-desk—that old desk in the corner. Being drunk when he got it out, he had let every one see where it was."

"And no one else," she asked, "except the people in the room, could have known where to look for it?"

"It says not."

"Of course he might have taken out the key and unlocked the hiding-place himself when he came down, and the murderer was either hidden in the room or came in afterward and attacked him."

"Those questions," he returned, "are all asked here. Why did he get out of bed and go down at all? And why was he killed? What was the motive? If the murderer had wanted to steal the ruby, why didn't he, or she, or they, steal it, instead of putting it on the dead man's forehead? What could have been the object of that?"

THE thunder was louder now, and the lightning more vivid. She got up and closed the windows. Sir John took

the opportunity to help himself to another drink.

"And how did the murderer or murderers escape? The doors and windows were all fastened."

She came back to him.

"Does it say anything was ever discovered?"

"Nothing," he replied. "The thing that scared them was the stone on the forehead. No one could give a reason for that. Lady Gaston locked the dagger and the ruby away together in the hiding-place, and went away from the house. She could never be persuaded to enter it again."

The girl clapped her hands.

"It's marvelous! What next?"

He settled himself again in his chair, and picked out another paper.

"Apparently nothing for a good time. It says Wilfred's son died when he was twenty, and the title passed to another branch of the family, to Charles Gaston, an invalid, who lived in London. He never came to this house, and was not at all interested in mysteries or curses. In spite of his bad health he lived a long time, and when he died his nephew George inherited. George Gaston was round about forty-five, with a rather commonplace sort of wife, and a son, and two daughters. From all accounts he was a quiet, decent, rather religious chap; and although, of course, he had heard the story of Wilfred's death, he wouldn't have anything said about it, and was specially anxious that his children shouldn't hear any suggestions of a family curse, which no doubt he regarded as profanity.

"His son was about nineteen, and the girls a year or two younger, and the first Christmas they were here there was a house party of some college friends of the boy, and school-fellows of the girls. Several of the youngsters were rummaging about in the library here one afternoon among some old papers, and came across an account of the murder of Wilfred, apparently scribbled down by one of the servants. Of course they at once started searching the old desk for the spring panel. It wasn't very difficult to find, and the key was there, untouched since it had been put back by Wilfred's wife before she left the house about fifty years before. The account told them more or less where the secret cupboard was, and they unlocked it, and took out the dagger and the ruby."

"Go on," she begged. "I'm frightfully thrilled!"

"Just as young Gaston was putting them on the table for the others to see, his father and mother came in, and there was something pretty bright in the way of a row. The things were put back at once, and they had to give solemn promises not to touch the key again. At about four o'clock the next morning Lady Gaston woke and found that her husband had got out of bed and was not in the room. She was frightened, and rang the bell to the servants' quarters. They found him dead on the floor here, stabbed with the dagger just as Wilfred had been, and the ruby was on his forehead."

He knocked the ash out of his pipe, and put it down on a small table by his chair.

"Well—Mr. Sherlock Holmes—any comments?"

"Not yet," she said, "I'm waiting to the end."

"That was the second case. It was almost exactly like the first. The doors and windows were all fastened, and the secret cupboard was open, just as they had been before. There was not a clue of any sort, and nothing was ever discovered. The ruby and the dagger were sent to London and locked up in a box at the bank, and

stayed there for another sixty or seventy years until Reginald Gaston came into the title. He was one of the bucks of his time, a sportsman and a gambler who wouldn't have been afraid of the devil himself. When some of his friends joked him about the curse he offered to bet a thousand pounds that he'd bring the ruby back to the house, show it to any one who wanted to see it, and be alive at the end of a year. His wife, who was nervous, did her utmost to persuade him not to do it, but he wouldn't listen to her. Some one took the bet, and he went up to town post-haste, got the ruby and dagger out of the bank, and brought them back here. Then he gave a dinner party, and showed the things round."

A vivid flash of lightning and a loud clap of thunder interrupted him. He paused until the noise had died away.

"That night, about two hours after they had gone to bed, screams were heard coming from the Gastons' bedroom. Lady Gaston was found sitting up in bed, with a lighted candle in her hand, almost beside herself with terror, pointing to her husband's empty place. There was a rush to the library, and he was found, just as the other two had been found before, with the ruby on his forehead. That's the whole story."

"And nothing more was ever found out?"

"Nothing," said Sir John. "No one was able to explain why those three men should have got out of bed and gone down to the library—what they could have found when they got there—why they were killed in the same way, though it could not, with that interval of time, have been by the same murderer—and why the ruby was put on their foreheads."

"What happened to the ruby," she asked, "after the last time?"

He looked over the remaining sheets.

"It doesn't say for certain. It may have been taken back to the bank, or put in the secret cupboard here again." He threw the papers down. "And that's that."

"Then—it may be here in this room now?"

"I suppose so—if it ever existed at all. I'm sure I don't care. It doesn't bother me."

She stood in front of him, her eyes dancing with excitement.

"Darling, we simply *must* find it."

"Go ahead," said Sir John, "*I* don't mind. There's the old desk. See if you can spot the panel. Bet you a quid there's nothing in it if you do."

THERE was the quick snap of a spring.

"Jack—there *is* a key here!"

"Good Lord!" said Sir John.

He went over and looked into the narrow little panel, cleverly hidden in the back of the desk.

"So there is." He took it out. "Devilish rusty. Very old, too."

"The secret cupboard," she cried; "where can it be?"

He went back to the papers on the table.

"I think there was a bit about that somewhere. Let's have a look. . . . Yes, here it is. Take away books seven to fifteen, fourth shelf. Bookcase nearest door on left. The partition can be knocked away and the keyhole is behind it. . . . Let me do it. Sure you're not afraid?"

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "Of course I'm not afraid. Such things don't happen in these days. It would take more than any old ruby to get *you* out of bed once you're in."

"I'll bet it would," grinned Sir John. "Well, here goes for the jolly old curse!

Line up for the Gaston thrill! Of course the bally thing may not be there at all. Probably been pinched long ago."

He took down the books from the shelf and pushed one of the partitions aside.

"The keyhole's there all right. . . . And . . . yes, by Jove, it is here! And the dagger, too!"

He brought them out, and put them on the table—a strange, curved Oriental dagger and a small leather bag. She took up the bag, and opening it, shook out a great blood-red stone into the palm of her hand.

"Oh Jack, look at it!"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir John.

"It's marvelous!" she cried.

He looked at the ruby, lying dark and angry against the creamy whiteness of her skin.

"Gad, it's a wonderful stone!"

She held it up to the light.

"Look at the color."

"I've never seen anything like it," he declared. "No wonder—hullo!"

He stared at her.

"What's the matter?"

A sudden change had come over her. She had turned deathly pale.

"I don't know. . . ."

He put his arm round her.

"Sweetheart, you're trembling."

She drew away from him. Her eyes were wide and strained.

"Jack, take it away from me. Take it out of my hand."

He took the stone and put it back on the table.

"Mary, my dear——"

She was breathing quickly. For a moment she swayed, putting out a hand to a chair to steady herself.

"Oh Jack, it's evil—I could feel it—terribly, dreadfully evil."

He took her in his arms.

"My darling—only a few minutes ago you were laughing at the idea——"

She shivered.

"I know—but I hadn't seen it then. I hadn't touched it. I didn't understand." She shuddered again. "Oh, I wish we'd left it there."

"By Jove," said Sir John. "I believe you're really frightened."

She clung to him. Her face was so white that he began to be anxious.

"Sweetheart, there's nothing to be nervous about. I ought not to have told you those stories about the beastly thing——"

Her hands clutched him tightly.

"Oh Jack! there *is* something to be nervous about—something awfully, horribly wicked." She looked at the red stone on the table, and her eyes dilated again with horror. "For God's sake put it away, and promise—promise you'll never touch it again."

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Sir John.

He turned to the table, picked up the ruby and put it back into the bag.

"We'll shove it where it was for to-night, and tomorrow I'll have the damned thing taken right away."

A minute later he turned back from the bookcase, and taking the key back to the old desk, snapped the spring panel to.

"There, little girl, there's nothing to worry about. Let's forget all about it——"

He was just in time to catch her as she fell forward in a dead faint.

A DEEP-TONED clock in the hall struck two. Not a sound disturbed the silence of the house. A figure in a dressing-gown paused at the top of the wide staircase, and began to descend slowly, noiselessly. . . . Sir John Gaston. . . .

Half-way down he paused again, listening.

He reached the bottom, and stopped, staring across the hall. The library door was open. There was a light. He crept across, step by step. . . .

Outside the door he halted and stood still for a moment. Then, without making a sound, he moved forward and looked into the room.

It needed all his self-control to check the exclamation that sprang to his lips. He stood watching his wife, stiffening with horror. His wife . . . Mary. . . .

The little cupboard in the bookcase was open again. She had taken the key from the panel in the desk, and unlocked it. She held the ruby in her cupped hands. She was smiling at it, whispering to it. It seemed almost as if she was praying to it. But the thing that held him petrified, horror-stricken, was the expression, the dreadful, unspeakable wickedness, of her face.

He tried to speak, to call her name, but his dry lips would not frame words. He could only stare at her, a cold, numbing sensation creeping over him. She was unconscious of his presence, oblivious of everything except the red stone in her hands. Her baleful eyes were fixed on it with a terrible unwinking stare, her lips moving ceaselessly with the same sibilant, toneless whisper. . . .

The same thing had happened to those three murdered men before him. . . . The reason they had left their beds was the reason he had left his, to *follow*. . . .

Her voice grew louder. She was speaking strange words he could not understand—chanting in a kind of evil ecstasy.

With a great effort he regained some control of himself. He forced himself to move a step further into the room—to speak.

"Mary——" He hardly recognized his own voice.

She turned her blazing eyes on him, mad with a demoniacal hatred.

"Put the thing down. Put it down."

He could feel her awful gaze paralyzing, hypnotizing him; that all his strength was being numbed into an icy helplessness. Then she sprang at him, and he saw the gleam of the curved dagger in her hand. Drawing back, his foot slipped on the polished floor, and he fell backward. The fall saved his life. Lunging at him with incredible strength, she overbalanced and clutching at the back of a chair, let the ruby fall from her hand.

Instantly the madness passed from her face. She stood perfectly still, staring straight out in front of her with dull glazing eyes. The dagger dropped from her limp fingers. Without another look at him she went slowly out of the room, across the hall to the stairs.

He locked the library door and waited until she had reached the top, then followed. She went along the corridor, and opened their bedroom door. When he entered a few minutes afterward and switched on a shaded light, she was sleeping peacefully, her lovely face pillowed on her arm. He bent down and kissed her. She opened her soft, gentle eyes.

"Jack, darling, what's the matter? Why are you up?"

He laughed, kissing her again.

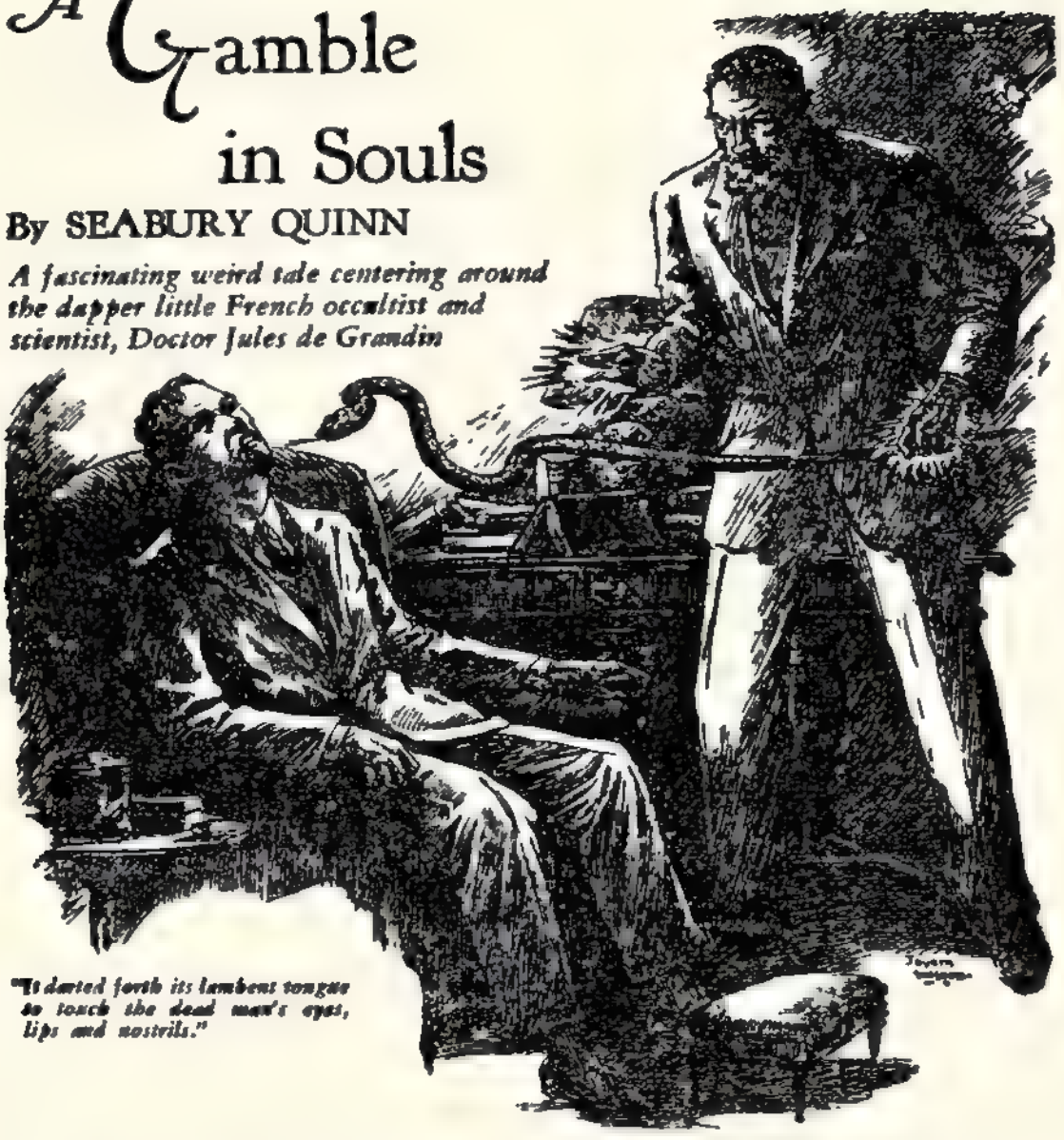
"It's all right, sweetheart. I wanted some water—a bit thirsty. Go to sleep again."

He turned off the light, and getting back into bed, occupied himself with grim plans for the fate of the ruby in the morning.

A Gamble in Souls

By SEABURY QUINN

A fascinating weird tale centering around the dapper little French occultist and scientist, Doctor Jules de Grandin



"It darted forth its lambent tongue to touch the dead man's eyes, lips and nostrils."

WE CROSSED the big, cement-floored room with its high-set, steel-barred windows and white-washed walls, and paused before the heavy iron grille stopping the entrance to a narrow, tunnel-like corridor. Our guide cast a sidelong, half-apologetic look in our direction. "Visitors aren't—er—usually permitted past this point," he told us. "This is the 'jumping-off place,' you know, and the fellows in there aren't ordinary convicts, so——"

"Perfectly, *Monsieur,*" Jules de Grandin's voice was muted to a whisper in deference to our surroundings, but had lost none of its authoritativeness with lessened volume. "One understands; but you will recall that we are not ordinary visitors. Me, I have credentials from the *Service Sûreté,* and in addition the note

from *Monsieur le Gouverneur*, does it not say——"

"Quite so," the warden's secretary assented hastily. Distinguished foreign criminologists with credentials from the French Secret Police and letters of introduction from the governor of the state were not to be barred from the penitentiary's anteroom of death, however irregular their presence might be. "Open the gate, Casey," he ordered the uniformed guardian of the grille, standing aside politely to permit us to precede him.

The death house was L-shaped, the long bar consisting of a one-story corridor some sixteen feet in width, its south wall taken up by a row of ten cells, each separated from its neighbor by a twelve-inch brick wall and from the passageway by steel cage-doors. Through these the inmates looked upon a blank, bleak whitewashed wall of brick, pierced at intervals by small, barred windows set so high that even the pale north light could not strike directly into the cells. Each few feet, almost as immobile as sentries on fixed post, blue-uniformed guards backed against the northern wall, somnolent eyes checking every movement of the men caged in the little cells which lined the south wall. Straight before us at the passage end, terrifying in its very commonplaceness, was a solid metal door, wide enough for three to pass abreast, grained and painted in imitation of golden oak. SILENCE, proclaimed the legend on its lintel. This was the "one-way door" leading to the execution chamber which, with the autopsy room immediately adjoining, formed the foot-bar of the building's L. The air was heavy with the scent peculiar to inefficient plumbing, poor ventilation and the stale smoke of cigarettes. The place seemed shadowed by the vulture-wings of hopelessness.

We paused to gaze upon the threshold, nostrils stinging with the acrid effluvium of caged humanity, ears fairly aching with the heaviness of silence which weighed upon the confined air. "Oh, my dear, my darling"—it was a woman's sob-strangled voice which came to us from the gateway of the farthest cell—"I just found out. I—I never knew, my dear, until last night, when he told me. Oh, what shall I do? I—I'll go to the governor — tell him everything! Surely, surely, he'll——"

The man's low-voiced reply cut in: "No use, my dear; there's nothing but your word, you know, and Larry has only to deny it. No use; no use!" He bowed his head against the grating of his cell a moment; then, huskily: "This makes it easier though, Beth dear; it's been the thought that you didn't know, and never could, that hurt, hurt more than my brother's perfidy, even. Oh, my dear, I——"

"I love you, Lonny," came the woman's hoarse avowal. "Will it help you to know that—to hear it from my lips?"

"Help?" A seraphic smile lighted up the tired, lined face behind the bars. "Help? Oh, my darling, when I walk that little way tomorrow night I'll *feel* your love surrounding me; feel the pressure of your hand in mine to give me courage at the end——" He broke off shortly, sobs knotting in his throat, but through his eyes looked such love and adoration that it brought the tears unbidden to my lids and raised a great lump in my throat.

He reached his long, artistically fine hands across the little space which separated his cell door from the screen of strong steel mesh which guards had set between him and the woman, and she pressed her palms against the wire from her side. A moment they stood thus; then:

"Please, *please!*" she turned beseechingly to the man in blue who occupied a chair behind her. "Oh, please take the screen away a moment. I—I want so to kiss him good-bye!"

The man looked undecided for a moment, then, sudden resolution forming in his immobile face, put forth his hand to move the wire netting.

"Here!" began our guide, but the word was never finished, for quicker than a striking snake, de Grandin's slim, white hand shot out, seized him by the neck immediately below the *medulla oblongata,* exerting sudden steel-tight pressure so that the hail stopped abruptly on a strangled, inarticulate syllable and the man's mouth hung open, round and empty as the entrance to a cave. "*Monsieur,*" the little Frenchman promised in an almost soundless whisper, "if you bid him stop I shall most surely kill you." He relaxed the pressure momentarily, and:

"It's against the regulations!" our guide expostulated softly. "He knows he's not allowed to——"

"Nevertheless," de Grandin interrupted, "the screen shall be removed, *Monsieur.* Name of a little blue man, would you deny them one last kiss—when he stands upon death's door-sill? But no!"

The screen had been removed, and, although the steel bars intervened, the man and woman clung and kissed, arms circled round each other, lips and hearts together in a final, long farewell. "Now," gasped the prisoner, releasing the woman's lips from his for an instant, "one long, long kiss, my dearest dear, and then good-bye. I'll close my eyes and stop my ears so I can't hear you leaving, and when I open them again, you'll be gone, but I'll have the memory of your lips on mine when—when——" He faltered, but:

"My dear; my *dear!*" the woman moaned, and stopped his mouth with burning kisses.

"*Parbleu,* it is sacrilege that we should look at them—about face!" whispered Jules de Grandin, and swung himself about so that his back was to the cells. Obedient to his hands upon our elbows, the warden's secretary and I turned, too, and stood thus till the soft tap-tap of the woman's heels informed us she had left the death house.

We followed slowly, but ere we left the place of the condemned I cast a last look at the prisoner. He was seated at the little table which, with a cot and chair, constituted the sole furniture of his cell. He sat with head bowed, elbow on knee, knuckles pressed against his lips, not crying, but staring dry-eyed straight ahead, as though he could already vision the long vistas of eternity into which the state would hurl him the next night.

A long line of men in prison uniform marched through the corridor as we reentered the main building of the penitentiary. Each bore an empty tin cup in one hand, an empty tin plate in the other. They were going to their evening meal.

"Would you care to see 'em eat?" the warden's secretary asked as the files parted at the guard's hoarse "Gangway!" and we walked between the rows of men.

"*Mais non,*" de Grandin answered. "Me, I, too, desire to eat tonight, and the spectacle of men eating like caged brutes would of a certainty destroy my appetite. Thank you for showing us about, *Monsieur,* and please, I beg, do not report the guard's infraction of the regulations in taking down that screen. It was a work of mercy, no less, my friend!"

THE miles clicked swiftly off on my speedometer as we drove along the homeward road. De Grandin was for the

most part sunk in moody silence, lighting one evil-smelling French cigarette from the glowing stump of another, occasionally indulging in some half-articulate bit of highly individualized profanity; once or twice he whipped the handkerchief from his left cuff and wiped his eyes half furtively. As we neared the outskirts of Harrisonville he turned to me, small eyes blazing, thin lips retracted from small, even teeth.

"Hell and furies, and ten million small blue devils in the bargain, Friend Trowbridge," he exclaimed, "why must it be? Is there no way that human justice can be vindicated without the punishment descending on the innocent no less than on the guilty? Me, I damn think——" He turned away a moment, and:

"*Mordieu,* my friend, be careful!" he clutched excitedly at my elbow with his left hand, while with the other he pointed dramatically toward the figure which suddenly emerged from the shadowy evergreens bordering the road and flitted like a wind-blown leaf across the spot of luminance cast by my headlights.

"*Cordieu,* she will not die of senility if she persists in such a way of walking——" he continued, then interrupted himself with a shout as he flung both feet over the side of the car and rushed down the road to grapple with the woman whose sudden appearance had almost sent us skidding into the wayside ditch.

Nor was his intervention a split-second too soon; for even as he reached her side the mysterious woman had run to the center of the highway bridge and was drawing herself up, preparatory to leaping over the parapet to the rushing stream which foamed among a bed of jagged rocks some fifty feet below.

"Stop it, *Mademoiselle!* Desist!" he ordered sharply, seizing her shoulders in his small, strong hands and dragging her back from her perilous perch by main force.

She fought like a cornered wildcat. "Let me go!" she raged, struggling in the little Frenchman's embrace, then, finding her efforts to break loose of no avail, writhed suddenly around and clawed at his cheeks with desperation-strengthened fingers. "Let me go; I want to die; I must die; I *will* die, I tell you! Let me go!"

De Grandin shifted his grip from her shoulders to her wrists and shook her roughly, as a terrier might shake a rat. "Silence, *Mademoiselle;* be still!" he ordered curtly. "Cease this business of the monkey at once, or *pardieu*"—he administered another vigorous shake—"I shall be forced to tie you!"

I added my efforts to his, grasping the struggling woman by the elbows and forcing her into the twin shafts of light thrown by the car's driving-lamps.

Stooping, the Frenchman retrieved her hat and placed it on her dark head at a decidedly rakish angle, then regarded her speculatively a moment. "Will you promise to restrain yourself if we release you, *Mademoiselle?*" he asked after a few seconds' silent scrutiny.

The girl—she was little more—regarded us sullenly a moment, then burst into a sharp, cachinnating laugh. "You've just postponed it for a while," she answered with a shrug of her narrow shoulders. "I'll kill myself as soon as you leave me, anyway. You might as well have saved yourselves the trouble."

"U'm?" de Grandin murmured. "Exactly, precisely, quite so, *Mademoiselle.* I had that very thought in mind, and it is for that reason that we shall not leave you for a little so small moment. Pains of a dyspeptic pig, are we then murderers? But of course not. Tell us where

you live, and we shall do ourselves the honor of escorting you there."

SHE faced us with quivering nostrils and heaving, tumultuous bosom, anger flashing from her eyes, a diatribe of invective seemingly ready to spill from her parted lips. She had a rather pretty, high-bred face; unnaturally large, dark eyes, seeming larger because of the violet half-moons under them; death-pale skin contrasting sharply with the little tendrils of dark, curling hair which hung about her cheeks beneath the rim of her wide leghorn hat. There was something vaguely familiar about her features, about the soft, throaty contralto of her voice, about the way she moved her hands to emphasize her words. I drew my brows together in an effort at remembrance, even as de Grandin spoke.

"Mademoiselle," he told her with a bow, "you are too beautiful to die, accordingly—ah, *parbleu,* I know you now!

"It is the lady of the prison, my good Trowbridge!" He turned to me, wonder and compassion struggling for the mastery of his face. "But certainly." To her: "Your change of dress deceived me at the first, *ma pauvre.*"

He drew away a pace, regarding her intently. "I take back my remark," he admitted slowly. "You have an excellent reason for desiring to be rid of this cruel world of men and man-made justice, *Mademoiselle,* nor am I any stupid, moralistic fool who would deny you such poor consolation as death may bring, but"—he made a deprecating gesture—"this is not the time nor place nor manner, *Mademoiselle.* It were a shame to break your lovely body on those rocks down there, and—have you thought of this?—there is a poor one's body to be claimed and given decent burial when the debts of justice have been paid. Can not you wait until that has been done, then——"

"Justice?" cried the woman in a shrill, hard voice. *"Justice?* It's the most monstrous miscarriage of justice there ever was! It's murder, I tell you; wilful murder, and——"

"Undoubtlessly," he assented in a soothing voice, "but what is one to do? The law's decree——"

"The law!" she scoffed. "Here's one time where the strength of sin really is the law! Law's supposed to punish the guilty and protect the innocent, isn't it? Why doesn't the law let Lonny go, and take that red-handed murderer who did the killing in his place? Because the law says a wife can't testify against her husband! Because a perjured villain's testimony has sent a blameless man to death—that's why!"

De Grandin turned a fleeting glance on me and made a furtive, hardly noticeable gesture toward the car. "But certainly, *Mademoiselle,"* he nodded, "the laws of men are seldom perfect. Will not you come with us? You shall tell us your story in detail, and if there is aught that we can do to aid you, please be assured that we shall do it. At any rate, if you will give consideration to your plan to kill yourself, and having talked with us still think you wish to die, I promise to assist you, even in that. We are physicians, and we have easily available some medicines which will give you swift and painless release, nor need any one be the wiser. You consent? Good, excellent, *bien.* If you please, *Mademoiselle."* He bowed with courtly, Continental courtesy as he assisted her into my car.

SHE sat between us, her hands lying motionless and flaccid, palms upward, in her lap. There was something monotonous, flat and toneless, in her deep and

rather husky voice as she began her recitation. I had heard women charged with murder testifying in their own defense in just such voices. Emotion played upon too harshly and too long results in a sort of anesthesia, and emphasis becomes impossible.

"My name's Beth Cardener—Elizabeth Cardener," she began without preliminary. "I am the wife of Lawrence Cardener, the sculptor. You know him? No? No matter.

"I am twenty-nine years old and have been married three years. My husband and I have known each other since childhood. Our families had adjoining houses in the city and adjoining country places at Seagirt. My husband and I and his twin brother, Alonzo, played together on the beach and in the ocean in summer and went to school together in the winter, though the boys were two grades above me, being three years older. They looked so much alike that no one but their family and I—who was with them so much that I was almost like a sister—could tell them apart, and Lonny was always getting into trouble for things which Larry did. Sometimes they'd change clothes and one would go to call on the girl with whom the other had an engagement, and no one ever knew the difference. They never fooled me, though; I could usually tell them by a slight difference in their voices, but if I weren't quite sure, there was one infallible clue. Lonny had a little scar behind his left ear. I struck him there with a sand-spade when he was six and I was three. He and Larry had been teasing me, and I flew into a fury. He happened to be nearer, and got the blow. I was terribly frightened after I'd done it, and cried far more than he did. The wound wasn't really serious, but it left a little, white scar, not more than half an inch in length, which never disappeared. So, when the boys would try to play a joke on me I'd make them let me turn their ears forward; then I could be certain which was Lonny and which Larry.

"When the war came and the boys were seventeen, both were wild to go, but their father wouldn't let them. Finally Larry ran away and joined the Canadians—they weren't particular in checking up on ages in Canada those days. Before Larry had been gone three weeks his brother joined him, and they were both assigned to the same regiment. Larry was given a lieutenancy shortly after he joined up and Lonny was made a subaltern before they sailed for France.

"Both boys were slightly gassed at the second battle of the Marne and were in recuperation camp until the termination of hostilities. They came back together, in uniform, of course, in '19, and I was in a perfect frenzy of hero-worship. I fell madly in love with both of them. Both loved me, too, and each asked me to marry him. It was hard to choose between them, but Lonny—the one I'd 'marked' with my spade when we were kids—was a little sweeter, a little gentler than his brother, and finally I accepted him. Larry showed no bitterness, and the three of us continued as close, firm friends, even after the engagement, as we'd been before.

"Lonny was determined to become a painter, while Larry had ambitions to become a sculptor, and they went off to Paris for a year of study, together, as always. We were to be married when they returned, and Larry was to be best man. We'd hoped to have a June wedding, but the boys' studies kept them abroad till mid-August, so we decided to postpone it till Thanksgiving Day, and both the boys came down to Seagirt to spend the remainder of the season.

"There was a girl named Charlotte Dey stopping at a neighbor's house, a lovely

creature, exquisitely made, with red-gold hair and topaz eyes and skin as white as milk. Larry seemed quite taken with her, and she with him, and Lonny and I began to think that he'd found consolation there. We even wished in that romantic way young lovers have that Larry'd hurry up and pop the question so we could have a double wedding in November.

"You remember I told you our houses stood beside each other? We'd always been so intimate that I'd been like a member of the Cardener family, even before I was engaged to Lonny. We never thought of knocking on each other's doors, and if I wanted anything from the Cardeners or they wanted anything from our house, we were as apt to enter through one of the French windows opening on the verandas as we were to go through the front door.

"One evening, after Lonny and I had said good-night, I happened to remember that I'd left a book in the Cardener library, and I especially wanted that book early next morning; for it had a recipe for sally lunn in it, and I wanted to get up early and make some as a surprize for Lonny next morning at breakfast. So I just ran across the intervening lawn and up the veranda steps, intent on going through the library window, getting the book and going back to bed without saying anything to anybody. I'd just mounted the steps and started down the porch toward the library when Lonny loomed up in front of me. He'd slipped on his pajamas and beach robe, and had been sitting on a porch rocker. 'Beth!' he exclaimed in a sort of nervous, almost frightened way.

" 'Why, yes, it's I,' I answered, putting my hand in his and continuing to walk toward the library window.

" 'You mustn't come any farther,' he suddenly told me, dragging me to a stop by the hand which he'd been holding. 'You must go back, Beth.'

" 'Why, Lonny!' I exclaimed in amazement. Being told I couldn't go and come at will in the Cardener house was like being slapped in the face.

" 'You must go back, please,' he answered in a sort of embarrassed, stubborn way. 'Please, Beth; I can't explain, dear; but please go, quickly.'

"There was nothing else to do, so I went. I couldn't speak, and I didn't want him to see me crying and know how much he'd hurt me.

"I DIDN'T go back to my room. Instead I walked across the stretch of lawn behind the house, down to the beach, and sat there on the sand. It was a bright September night, and the full moon made it almost light as day; so I couldn't help seeing what followed. I'd sat there on the beach for fifteen minutes, possibly, when I happened to look back. The boys' rooms opened on the side veranda and to reach the library one had to pass them. Part of the porch was full-roofed, and consequently in shadow; the remainder was roofed with slats, like a pergola, and the moonlight illuminated it almost as brightly as it did the beach and the back lawn. As I glanced back across my shoulder I saw two figures emerge from one of the French windows leading to the boys' rooms; which one I couldn't be sure, but it looked like Lonny's. One was a man in pajamas and beach robe, the other was a woman, clothed only in a light nightdress, kimono and sandals. I sat there in a sort of stupor, too surprized and horrified to move or make a sound, and as I looked the moonlight glinted on the girl's gold hair. It was Charlotte Dey.

"While I sat watching them I saw him take her in his arms and kiss her; then she ran down the steps with a little laugh,

calling back across her shoulder, 'See you in the morning, Lonny.'

" 'Lonny!' I couldn't believe it. There must be some mistake; the twins were still as like as reflections in a mirror, people were always mistaking them, but—'See you in the morning, Lonny!' kept dinning in my brain like the surging of the surf at my feet. The world seemed crumbling into dust beneath me, while that endless, laughing refrain kept singing in my ears: 'See you in the morning, Lonny.'

"The man on the porch stood looking after the retreating figure of the girl as she ran across the lawns to the house where she was stopping, then drew a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from the pocket of his robe. As he bent to light the cigarette he turned toward the ocean and saw me sitting on the sand. Next instant he turned and fled, ran headlong to the window of his room, and disappeared in the darkness.

"What I had seen made me sick—actually physically sick. I wanted to run into the house and fling myself across my bed and cry my heart out, but I was too weak to rise, so I just slumped down on the sand, buried my face in my arms and began to cry. I didn't know how long I'd been lying there, praying that my heart actually would break and that I'd never see another sunrise, when I felt a hand upon my shoulder.

" 'Why, Beth,' somebody said, 'whatever is the matter?'

"It was one of the boys, which one I couldn't be sure, and he was dressed in corduroy slacks, a sweater and a cap. The bare-head craze hadn't struck the country in those days.

" 'Who are you?' I sobbed, for my eyes were full of tears, and I couldn't see very plainly. 'Is it Larry, or——'

" 'Larry it is, old thing,' he assured me with a laugh. 'Old Lawrence in the flesh and blood, ready to do his Boy Scout's good daily deed by comforting a lady in distress. I've been taking a little tramp down the beach, looking at the moon and feeling grand and lonesome and romantic, and I come home to find you crying here, as if these sands didn't get enough salt water every day. Where's Lonny?'

" 'Lonny——' I began, but he cut in before I had a chance to finish.

" 'Don't tell me you two've quarreled! Why, this was to have been his big night—one of his big nights. The old cuss intimated that he'd be able to bear my absence with true Christian fortitude this evening, as he had some very special spooning to do; so I sought consolation of the Titian-haired Charlotte, only to be told that she, too, had a heavy date. *Ergo,* as we used to say at college, here is Lawrence by his lone, after walking over ten miles of beach and looking over several thousand miles of ocean. Want to go for a swim before you turn in? Go get your bathing-clothes; I'll be with you in a jiff.' He turned to run toward the house, but I called him back.

" 'Larry,' I asked, 'you're sure Lonny hinted that he'd like to be alone tonight?'

" 'Certain sure; honest true, black and blue, cross my heart and hope to die!' he answered. 'The old duffer almost threw me out bodily, he was so anxious to see me go.'

" 'And Charlotte,' I persisted, 'did she say what—with whom—her engagement for this evening was?'

" 'Why, no,' he answered. 'I say, see here, old girl, you're not getting green-eyed, are you? Why, you know there's only one woman in the world for Lonny, and——'

" 'Is there?' I interrupted grimly.

" 'I'll say there is, and you're It, spelled with a capital I, just as Charlotte is the one for me. Have I your blessing when

I ask her to be Mrs. Lawrence Cardener tomorrow, Beth? I'd have done it tonight, if she hadn't put me off.'

"I couldn't stand it. Lonny had betrayed us both, made a mockery of the love I'd given him and debauched the girl his brother loved. Before I realized it, I'd sobbed the whole tale out on Larry's shoulder, and before I was through we were holding each other like a pair of lost babes in the wood, and Larry was crying as hard as I.

"He was the first to recover his poise. 'No use crying over a tin of spoiled beans, as we used to say in the army,' he told me. 'He and Charlotte can have each other, if they want. I'm through with her, and him, too, the two-faced, double-crossing swine! Keep your tail up, old girl, don't let him know how much he's hurt you; don't let him know you know about it at all; just give him back his ring and let him go his way without an explanation.'

" 'Will you take the ring back to him now?' I asked.

" 'Surest thing,' he promised, 'but don't ask me to make explanations; I'm digging out tomorrow. Off to Paris the day after. Good-bye, old dear, and—better luck next time.'

"I WAS up early next morning, too. By sunrise I was back in Harrisonville, breaking every speed regulation on the books on the drive up from Seagirt. By noon I had my application filed for a passport; three days later I sailed for England on the *Vauban*.

"An aunt of mine was married to a London barrister and I stopped with her a while. Lonny wrote me every day, at first, but I sent his letters back unopened. Finally he came to see me, but I wouldn't meet him. He came back twice, but before he could call the third time I packed and rushed off to the country.

"Larry wrote me frequently, and from him I learned that Lonny had joined the Spanish Foreign Legion which was fighting the Riffs, later that he had been discharged and was making quite a name for himself as a painter of Oriental landscapes. He did some quite good portraits, too, and was almost famous when I came back to America after being four years abroad. Lonny tried to see me, but I managed to avoid him, except at parties when there were others about, and finally he stopped annoying me.

"Three years ago I was married to Larry Cardener, but Lonny wasn't our best man. Indeed, we had a very quiet wedding, timed to take place while he was away.

"Larry seemed to have forgotten all his rancor against Lonny, and Lonny was at our house a great deal. I avoided him at first, but gradually his old sweetness and gentleness won me back, and though I could never quite forget his perfidy to me, somehow, I think that I forgave him."

"He was a changed man, *Madame?*" de Grandin asked softly as the woman halted in her narrative and sat passively, staring sightlessly ahead, hands folded motionless in her lap.

"No," she answered in that oddly uninflected tone, "he was less changed than Larry. A little older, a little more serious, perhaps, but still the same sweet, ingenuous lad I'd known and loved so long ago. Larry had become quite gray—early grayness runs in the Cardener family—while Lonny had only a single gray streak running backward from his forehead where a Riff saber had slashed his scalp. He'd picked up an odd trick, too, of brushing his mustache ever so lightly with his bent forefinger when he was puzzled. He explained this by the fact

that most of the officers in the Spanish Legion wore full mustaches, different from the close-cropped ones affected by the British, and that he'd followed the custom, but never got quite used to the extra hair on his face. Now, though he'd gone back to the clipped mustache of his young manhood, the Legion mannerism persisted. I can see him now when he and Larry were having an argument over some point of art technique and Larry got the best of it—he was always cleverer than Lonny—how he'd raise his bent finger and brush first one side of his mustache, then the other."

"U'm," de Grandin commented, and as he did so, unconsciously raised his hand to tweak the needle-pointed ends of his own trimly waxed wheat-blond mustache. "One quite understands, *Madame*. And then?"

"Larry had done well with his art," she answered. "He'd had some fine commissions and executed all successfully, but somehow he seemed changing. For one thing, since prohibition, he'd taken to drinking rather heavily—said he had to do it entertaining business prospects, though that was no excuse for his consuming a bottle of port and half a pint of whisky nearly every evening after dinner——"

"Que magnifique!" de Grandin broke in softly, then: "Pray proceed, *Madame*."

"He was living beyond our means, too. As soon as he began to be successful he discarded the studio at the house and rented a pretentious one downtown. Often he spent the night there, and though I didn't actually know it for a fact, I understood he often gave elaborate parties there at night; parties which cost a lot more than we could afford.

"I never understood it, for Larry didn't take me into his confidence at all, but early this spring he seemed desperately in need of money. He tried to borrow everywhere, but no one would lend to him; finally he went to his father.

"Mr. Cardener was a queer man, easy-going in most ways, but very hard in others. He absolutely refused to lend Larry a cent, but offered to advance him what he needed on his share of his inheritance. He'd made a will in which the boys were co-legatees, each to have one-half the estate, you see. Larry accepted eagerly, then went back for several more advances, until his share was almost dissipated. Then——" she paused, not in a fit of weeping, not even with a sob, but rather as though she had come to an impasse.

"Yes, *Madame;* then?" de Grandin prompted softly.

"Then came the scandal. Mr. Cardener was found dead—murdered—in his library one morning, slashed and cut almost to ribbons with a painter's palette-knife. The second man, who answered the door the night before they found him, was a new servant, but he had seen Larry several times and Lonny once. He testified that Lonny came to the house about ten o'clock, quarreled violently with his father, and left in a rage twenty minutes or half an hour later. He identified Lonny positively by the gray streak in his hair, which was otherwise dark brown, and by the fact that he brushed his mustache nervously with the knuckle of his right forefinger, both when he demanded to see his father and when he left. After Lonny'd gone, the servant went to the library, but found the door locked and received no answer to his rapping. He thought Mr. Cardener was in a rage, as he had been on several occasions when Larry had called; so he made no attempt to break into the room. But next morning when they found Mr. Cardener hadn't slept in his bed and the library door was

still locked, they broke in, and found him murdered."

"U'm?" de Grandin murmured noncommittally. "And were there further clues, *Madame?*"

"Yes, unfortunately. On the library table, so plainly marked in blood that it could not be mistaken, was the print of Lonny's whole left hand. Not just a fingerprint, but the entire palm and fingers. Also, on the palet-knife with which the killing had been done, they found Lonny's fingerprints."

"U'm," repeated Jules de Grandin. "He was at pains to put the noose around his neck, this one."

"So it seemed," agreed our passenger. "Lonny denied being at his father's house that night, or any night within a month, but there was no way he could prove an alibi. He lived alone, having his studio in his house, and his servants, a man and wife, went home every night after dinner. They weren't there the night of the murder, of course. Then there was that handprint and those finger-marks upon the knife."

"Eh bien, Madame," de Grandin answered, "that is the hardest nut of all to crack, the deepest river of them all to ford. Human witnesses may lie, human memories may fail, or be wofully inexact, but fingerprints—handprints? No, it is not so. Me, I was too many years associated with the *Service Sûreté* not to learn as much. What laymen commonly deride as circumstantial evidence is the best evidence of them all. I would rather base a case on it than on the testimony of a hundred human witnesses, all of whom might be either honestly mistaken or most unmitigated liars. If you can but explain away——"

"I *can,*" the girl broke in with her first show of animation. "Listen: Last year, six months before the murder, three months before Larry made his first request for funds from his father, he began making a collection of casts of famous hands as a hobby. When he told Lonny he wanted to include his among them, Lonny nearly went into hysterics at the idea. But he consented to let Larry take a cast. I don't know much about such things, but isn't it customary to take such impressions directly in plaster of Paris?"

"Plaster of Paris? But certainly," the Frenchman answered with a puzzled frown. "Why is it that you ask?"

"Because Larry took the impression of his brother's hands in gelatin."

"Grand Dieu des artichauts!" exclaimed de Grandin. "In *gélatine?* Oh, never-to-be-sufficiently-anathematized treachery! One begins to see the glimmer of a little so small gleam of light in this dark case, *Madame.* Say on. I shake, *parbleu,* I quiver with attention!"

For the first time she looked directly at him, nodding her small head. "At the trial Larry admitted that he'd had advances from his father, but declared he'd gotten them for Lonny. He proved it, too."

"Proved it?" de Grandin echoed. "How do you mean, *Madame?*"

"Just what I say. The canceled checks were shown in court by Mr. Cardener's executor, and every one of them had been endorsed and cashed by Lonny. Lonny swore Larry asked him to cash them for him so that no one could trace the money, because he was afraid of attachment proceedings, but Larry denied this under oath and offered his bank books in substantiation of his claim. None of them showed deposits of any such amounts as he'd had from his father."

DE GRANDIN clenched his little hands to fists and beat the knuckles against his temples. *"Mon Dieu,"* he moaned,

"this case will be the death of me, *Madame*. See if I apprehend you rightly:

"It appeared to those who sat in court"—he checked the items off upon his fingers—"that Monsieur Lawrence, at the risk of incurring paternal displeasure, secured loan after loan on his inheritance, ostensibly for himself, but actually for his brother. He proves he turned his father's loans intact over to Monsieur Alonzo. His brother says he cashed the checks and gave the cash back. This is denied. Furthermore, proof, or rather lack of proof, that the brother ever banked such sums is offered. Sitting as we do behind the scenes, we may suspect that Monsieur Lawrence is indulging in double-dealing; but did we sit out in the theater as did that judge and jury, should we not have been fooled, as well? I think so. What makes you sure that they were wrong and we are right, *Madame?* I do not cast aspersion on your intuition; I merely ask to know."

"I have proof," she answered levelly. "When Lonny had been sentenced and the governor refused to intervene, even to commute his sentence to life imprisonment, it seemed to me that I'd go wild. All these years I'd thought I hated Lonny for what he did that night so long ago; when I finally brought myself to see and talk with him, I thought the hatred had lulled to mere resentment, passive dislike. I was wrong. I never hated Lonny; I'd always loved him, only I loved my foolish, selfish pride more. What if he did—what if he and Charlotte Dey—oh, you understand! Lots of men—most men, I suppose—have affairs before marriage, and their wives and the world think nothing of it. Why should I have set myself up as the exception and demanded greater purity in the man I took to husband than most wives ask—or get? When I realized there was no hope for Lonny, I was nearly frantic, and last night after dinner I begged Larry to try to think of some way we could save him.

"He'd been drinking more than ever lately; last night he was sottish, beastly. 'Why should I try to save the poor fool?' he asked. 'D'ye think I've been to all the trouble to put him where he is just to pull him out?' Then, drunkenly, boastfully, he told me everything.

"It wasn't Lonny whom I'd seen with Charlotte Dey that night at Seagirt. It was Larry. When Lonny said good-night to me and went into the house, he heard Larry and Charlotte in Larry's room, which was next to his. He knocked upon the door and demanded that Larry take her out of there at once, even threatening to tell their father if his order weren't obeyed immediately. Larry tried to argue, but finally agreed, for he seemed frightened when Lonny threatened to tell Mr. Cardener.

"Lonny, furious with his brother and the Dey girl, came out on the veranda to see that Charlotte actually left, and was sitting there when I came up the porch to get the cook-book. He wanted to spare me the humiliation of seeing Larry that way, and demanded that I go back at once. The poor lad was so anxious to help me that his manner was unintentionally rough.

"I'd just been gone a moment when Larry and Charlotte came out. Larry saw me crying on the sand, and the whole scheme came to him like an inspiration. 'Call me Lonny!' he whispered to Charlotte as they said good-night, and the spiteful little minx did it. Then he rushed back to his room, pulled outdoor clothes on over his pajamas and made a circuit of the house, waiting in the shadows till he saw me bow my head upon my arm, then running noiselessly across the lawn and beach till he was beside me and ready to play his little comedy.

"He hated Lonny for taking me away from him, and—you know how the old proverb says those whom we have injured are those whom we hate most?—his hatred seemed to grow and grow as time went on. Finally he evolved this scheme to murder Lonny. After he'd made the gelatine mold of Lonny's hands, he made a rubber casting from it, like a rubber stamp, you know, and then began importuning his father for money. Each time he'd get a check he'd have Lonny cash it for him, then put the money in some secret place. Finally, exactly as he'd planned, his father refused to advance him any more, and they quarreled. Then, knowing that the butler, who had known them both since they were little boys, would be away that night, he stained his hair to imitate Lonny's, called at the house and impersonated his brother. When his father demanded what he meant by the masquerade, he answered calmly that he'd come to kill him, and intended Lonny should be executed for the crime. He stabbed his father with a palet-knife he'd stolen from Lonny's studio almost a year before, hacked and slashed the body savagely, and made a careful print of the rubber hand in blood on the library table. Lonny's left-handed, you know, and it was the print of his left hand they found on the table, and the prints of his left fingers which were found marked in blood upon the handle of the knife.

"Now Larry wins either way. Lonny can't take his legacy under his father's will, for he's been convicted of murdering him; therefore, he can't make a will and dispose of his half of the estate. Larry takes Lonny's share as his father's sole surviving next of kin capable of inheriting, and he's already got most of his own through the advances he's received and hidden away. A wife can't testify against her husband in a criminal case; but even if I could repeat what he's confessed to me in court, who'd believe me? He need only deny everything, and I'd not only be ridiculed for inventing such a fantastic story, but publicly branded as my brother-in-law's mistress, as well. Larry told me that last night when I threatened to repeat his story to the governor, and Lonny agreed with him today. Oh, it's dreadful, ghastly, hideous! An innocent man's going to a shameful death for a crime he didn't commit, and a perfidious villain who admits the crime goes scot-free, enjoying his brother's heritage and gloating over his immunity from punishment. There isn't any God, of course; if there were, He'd never let such things occur; but there ought to be a hell, somewhere, where such things can be adjusted."

"Madame," de Grandin returned evenly, "do not be deceived. God is not made mock of, even by such scheming, clever rogues as him to whom you're married. Furthermore, it is possible that we need not wait the flames of hell to furnish an adjustment of this matter."

"But what can you or any one do?" the girl demanded. "No one will believe me; this story is so utterly bizarre——"

"It is certainly decidedly unusual," de Grandin answered non-committally.

"Oh? You think that I've invented it, too?" she wailed despairingly. "Oh, God, if there is a God, help, *please* help us in our trouble!"

"Quickly, Friend Trowbridge," de Grandin cried. "Assist me with her. She has swooned!"

WE DREW up at my door even as he spoke, and, the girl's form trailing between us, ascended the steps, let ourselves in and hastened to the consulting-room. The Frenchman eased our light

burden down upon the divan while I got sal volatile and aromatic ammonia.

"Madame," de Grandin told her when she had recovered consciousness, "you must let us take you home."

"Home?" she echoed almost vaguely, as though the word were strange to her. "I haven't any home. The house where *he* lives isn't home to me, nor is——"

"Nevertheless, *Madame,* it is to that house which you must let us take you. It would be too much to ask that you dissemble affection for one who did so vile a thing, but you can at least pretend to be reconciled to making the best of your helplessness. Please, *Madame,* I beg it of you."

"But why?" she answered wonderingly. "I only promised to delay my suicide till Lonny is—till he doesn't need me any more. Must I endure the added torture of spending my last few hours with *him?* Must my agony be intensified by having him gloat over Lonny's execution? —oh, he'll do it, never doubt that! I know him——"

"Perhaps, *Madame,* it may be that you shall see that which will surprize you before this business is finished," the Frenchman interrupted. "I can not surely promise anything—that would be too cruel—but be assured that I shall do my utmost to establish justice in this case. How? I do not surely know, but I shall try.

"Attend me carefully." He crossed the office, rummaged in the medicine cabinet a moment, then returned with a small phial in his hand. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"No," wonderingly.

"It is mercuric cyanide, a poison infinitely stronger and more swift in action than potassium cyanide or mercuric chloride, commonly called corrosive sublimate. You could not buy it, the law forbids its sale to laymen, yet here it is. A little so small pinch of this white powder on your tongue and *pouf!* unconsciousness and almost instant death. You want him, *hein?*"

"Oh, yes—yes!" she stretched forth eager hands, like a child begging for a sweetmeat.

"Very good. You shall go home and hide your intentions as ably as you can. You shall be patient under cruelty; you shall make no bungling effort to destroy yourself like that we caught you at tonight. Meanwhile, we shall do what we can for you and Monsieur Lonny. If we fail—*Madame,* this little bottle shall be yours when you demand it of me. Do you agree?"

"Yes," she responded, then, falteringly, as though assenting to her own execution: "I'm ready to go any time you wish to take me."

GARDENER'S big house was dark when we arrived, but our companion nodded understandingly. "He's probably in the library," she informed us. "It's at the back, and you can't see the lights from here. Thank you so much for what you've done—and what you've promised. Goodnight." She alighted nimbly and held her hand out in farewell.

De Grandin raised her fingers to his lips, and: "It may well be that we must see your husband upon business, *Madame,*" he whispered. "When is he most likely to be found at home?"

"Why, he'll probably be here till noon tomorrow. He's usually a late riser."

"Bien, Madame, it may be that we shall be forced to put him to the inconvenience of rising earlier than usual," he answered enigmatically as he brushed her fingers with his lips again.

"Now, what the devil are you up to?" I demanded reproachfully as we drove away. "You know there's nothing you can do for that poor chap in jail, or for that woman, either. It was cruel to hold out hope, de Grandin. Even your promise of the poison is unethical. You're making yourself an accessory before the fact to homicide by giving her that cyanide, and dragging me into it, too. We'll be lucky if we see the end of this affair without landing in prison."

"I think not," he denied. "I scarcely know how I shall go about it, but I propose a gamble in souls, my friend. Perhaps, with Hussein Obeyid's assistance we may yet win."

"Who the deuce is Hussein Obeyid?"

"Another friend of mine," he answered cryptically. "You have not met him, but you will. Will you be good enough to drive into East Melton Street? I do not know the number, but I shall surely recognize the house when we arrive."

East Melton Street was one of those odd, forgotten backwaters common to all cities where a heterogeneous foreign population has displaced the ancient "quality" who once inhabited the brownstone-fronted houses. Italians, Poles, Hungarians, with a sprinkling of other European miscellany dwelt in Melton Street, each nationality occupying almost definite portions of the thoroughfare, as though their territories had been meted out to them. Far toward the water-end, where rotting piers projected out into the oily waters of the bay and the far from pleasant odors of trash-laden barges were wafted landward on every puff of superheated summer breeze, was the Syrian quarter. Here Greeks, Armenians, Arabians, a scattering of Persians and a horde of indeterminate mixed-breeds of the Levant lived in houses which had once been mansions but were now so sunk in disrepair that the wonder was they had not been condemned long since. Here and there was a house which seemed relatively untenanted, being occupied by no more than ten or a dozen families; but for the most part the places swarmed with patently unwashed humanity, children whose extreme vocality seemed matched only by their total unacquaintance with soap and water sharing steps, windows and iron-slatted fire escapes with slattern women of imposing avoirdupois, arrayed in soiled white nightgowns and unlaced shoes shockingly run over at the heels.

De Grandin called a halt before a house set back in what had been a lawn between a fly-blown restaurant where coatless men played dominoes and consumed great quantities of heavy, deadly-looking food, and a "billiard academy" where rat-faced youths in corset-waisted trousers knocked balls about or perused blatantly colored foreign magazines. The house before which we drew up was so dark I thought it tenantless at first, but as we mounted the low step which stood before its door I caught a subdued gleam of light from its interior. A moment we paused, inhaling the unpleasant perfume of the dark and squalid street while de Grandin pulled vigorously at the brass bell-knob set in the stone coping of the doorway.

"It looks as though nobody's home," I hazarded as he rang and rang again, but:

"Salaam aleikum," a soft voice whispered, and the door was opened, not wide, but far enough to permit our entrance, by a diminutive individual in black satin waistcoat, loose, bloomer-like trousers and a red tarboosh several sizes too large for him.

"Aleikum salaam," de Grandin answered, returning the salute the other

made. "We should like to see your uncle on important business. Is he to be seen?"

"Bissahi!" the other answered in a high-pitched, squeaking voice, and hurried down the darkened hall toward the rear of the house.

"Is your friend his uncle?" I asked curiously, for the fellow was somewhere between sixty-five and seventy years of age, rather well advanced to possess an uncle, it seemed to me.

The little Frenchman chuckled. "By no means," he assured me. " 'Uncle' is a euphemism for 'master' with these people, and used in courtesy to servants."

I was about to request further information when the little old man returned and beckoned us to follow him.

"Salaam, Hussein Obeyid," de Grandin greeted as we passed through a curtained doorway, *"es salaat wes salaam aleik!*—Peace be with thee, and the glory!"

A portly, bearded man in flowing robe of striped linen, red tarboosh and red Morocco slippers rose from his seat beside the window, touching forehead, lips and breast with a quick gesture as he crossed the room to take de Grandin's outstretched hand. This, I learned as the Frenchman introduced us formally, was Doctor Hussein Obeyid, "one of the world's ten greatest philosophers," and a very special friend of Jules de Grandin's. Doctor Obeyid was a big man, not only stout, but tall and strongly built, with massive, finely chiseled features and a curling, square-cut beard of black which gave him somewhat the appearance of an Assyrian andro-sphinx.

The room in which we sat was as remarkable in appearance as its owner. It was thirty feet, at least, in length, being composed of the former front and back "parlors" of the old house, the partitions having been knocked out. Casement windows, glazed with richly painted glass, opened on a small back yard charmingly planted with grass and flowering shrubs; three electric fans kept the air pleasantly in motion. Persian rugs were on the polished floor and the place was dimly lighted by two lamps with pierced brass shades of Turkish fashion. The furniture was an odd conglomeration, lacquered Chinese pieces mingling with Eastern ottomans like enormously overgrown boudoir cushions, with here and there a bit of Indian cane-ware. Upon a stand was an aquarium in which swam several goldfish of the most gorgeous coloring I had ever seen, while near the opened windows stood what looked like an ancient refectory table with bits of chemical apparatus scattered over it. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with bookcases laden with volumes in unfamiliar bindings and glassed-in cabinets in which was ranged a miscellany of unusual objects—mummified heads, hands and feet, bits of clay inscribed with cuneiform characters, odd weapons and utensils of ancient make, fit to be included in the exhibitions of our best museums. A human skeleton, completely articulated, leered at us from a corner of the room. Such was the rest room and workshop of Doctor Hussein Obeyid, "one of the world's ten greatest philosophers."

De Grandin lost no time in coming to the point. Briefly he narrated Beth Cardener's story, beginning with our first glimpse of her in the penitentiary and ending with our leaving her upon her doorstep. "Once, years ago, my friend," he finished, "on the ancient Djebel Druse—the stronghold of that strange and mystic people who acknowledge neither Turk nor Frenchman as their overlord—I saw you work a miracle. Do you recall? A prisoner had been taken, and——"

"I recall perfectly," our host cut in, his deep voice fairly booming through the

room. "Yes, I well remember it. But it is not well to do such things promiscuously, my little one. The Ineffable One has His own plans for our goings and our comings; to gamble in men's souls is not a game which men should play at."

"Misère de Dieu!" de Grandin cried, "this is no petty game I ask that you should play, *mon vieux*. Madame Cardener? Her plight is pitiful, I grant; but women's hearts have broken in the past, and they will break till time shall be no more. No, it is not for her I ask this thing, but for the sake of justice. Shall ninety-million-times-damned perfidy vaunt itself in pride at the expense of innocence? 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord,' truly; but consider: Does He not ever act through human agencies when He performs his miracles? Damn yes. If there were any way this poor one's innocence could be established, even after death, I should not be here; but as it is he is enmeshed in webs of treachery. No sixty-times-accursed 'reasonable' man could be convinced he did not do that murder, and the so puerile Anglo-Saxon law of which the British and Americans prate so boastfully has its hard rules of evidence which for ever bar the truth from being spoken. This monstrous-great injustice must not—can not—be allowed, my friend."

Doctor Obeyid stroked his black beard thoughtfully. "I hesitate to do it," he replied, "but for you, my little birdling, and for justice, I shall try."

"Triomphe!" de Grandin cried, rising from his chair and bounding across the room to seize the other in his arms and kiss him on both cheeks. *"Ha,* Satan, thou art stalemated; tomorrow we shall make a monkey of your plans and of the plans of that so evil man who did your work, by damn!" Abruptly he sobered. "You will go with us tomorrow morning?" he demanded.

Doctor Obeyid inclined his head in acquiescence. "Tomorrow morning," he replied.

Then the diminutive, wrinkle-bitten "nephew" who performed the doctor's household tasks appeared with sweet, black coffee and execrable little tarts compounded of pistachio nuts, chopped dates and melted honey, and we drank and ate and smoked long, amber-scented cigarettes until the tower-clock of the near-by Syrian Catholic church beat out the quarter-hour after midnight.

IT WAS shortly after ten o'clock next morning when we called at Cardener's. Doctor Obeyid, looking more imposing, if possible, in a suit of silver-gray corduroy and a wide-brimmed black-felt hat than he had in Eastern robes, towered a full head above de Grandin and six inches over me as he stood between us and beat a soft tattoo on the porch floor with the ferule of his ivory-headed cane. It was a most remarkable piece of personal adornment, that cane. Longer by a half-foot than the usual walking-stick, it was more like the exaggerated staffs borne by gentlemen of the late Georgian period than any modern cane, and its carven ivory top was made to simulate a serpent's head, scales being reproduced with startling fidelity to life, and little beads of some green-colored stone—jade, I thought—being inlaid for the eyes. The wood of the staff was a kind which I could not classify. It was a vague, indefinite color, something between an olive-green and granite-gray, and overlaid with little intersecting lines which might have been in imitation of a reptile's scales or might have been a part of the strange wood's odd grain.

"We should like to see Monsieur Car-

dener——" began de Grandin, but for once he failed to keep control of the situation.

"Tell him Doctor Obeyid desires to talk with him," broke in our companion, in his deep, commanding voice. "At once, please."

"He's at breakfast now, sir," the servant answered. "If you'll step into the drawing-room and——"

"At once," Hussein Obeyid repeated, not with emphasis, but rather inexorably, as one long used to having his orders obeyed immediately and without question.

"Yes, sir," the butler returned, and led us toward the rear of the house.

Striped awnings kept the late summer sun from the breakfast room's open windows where a double row of scarlet geranium-tops stood nodding in the breeze. At the end of the polished mahogany table in the center of the room a man sat facing us, and it needed no second glance to tell us he was Lawrence Cardener. Line for line and feature for feature, his face was the duplicate of that of the prisoned man whom we had seen the day before. Even the fact that his upper lip was adorned by a close-cropped mustache, while the prisoner was smooth-shaven, and his hair was iron-gray, while the convict's close-clipped hair was brown, did not affect the marked resemblance to any degree.

"What the dev——" he began as the servant ushered us into the room, but Doctor Obeyid cut his protest short.

"We are here to talk about your brother," he announced.

"Ah?" An ugly, sneering smile gathered at the corners of Cardener's mouth. "You are, eh? Well?" He pushed the blue-willow club plate laden with mutton chops and scrambled eggs away from him and picked up a slice of buttered toast. "Get on with it," he ordered. "You wished to talk about my brother——"

"And you," Doctor Obeyid supplied. "It is not too late for you to make amends."

"Amends?" the other echoed, amusement showing in his eyes as he dropped a lump of sugar into his well-creamed coffee and stirred it with his spoon.

"Amends," repeated Obeyid. "You still may go before the governor, and——"

"Oh, so that's it, eh? My precious wife's been talking to you? Poor dear, she's a little touched, you know"—he tapped himself upon the temple significantly—"used to be fearfully stuck on Lonny, in the old days, and——"

"My friend," Obeyid broke in, "it is of your immortal soul that we must talk, not of your wife. Is it possible that you will let another bear the stigma of your guilt? Your soul——"

Cardener laughed shortly. "My soul, is it?" he answered. "Don't bother about *my* soul. If you're so much interested in souls, you'd better skip down to Trenton and talk to Lonny. He's got one now, but he won't have it long. Tonight they're going to——" his voice trailed off to nothingness and his eyes widened as he slowly and deliberately put his spoon down in its saucer. Not fear, but something like a compound of despair and resignation showed in his face as he stared in fascination at Hussein Obeyid.

I turned to glance at our companion, and a startled exclamation leaped involuntarily to my lips. The big, Semitic-featured face had undergone a startling transformation. The complexion had altered from swarthy tan to pasty gray, the eyes had started from their sockets, white, globular, expressionless as peeled onions. I had seen such horrible protrusion of the optics in corpses far gone in putrefaction when tissue-gas was bloating features out

of human semblance, but never had I seen a thing like this in a living countenance. Doctor Obeyid's lips were moving, but what he said I could not understand. It was a low, monotonous, singsong chant in some harsh and guttural language, rising and falling alternately with a majesty and power like the surging of a wind-swept sea upon the sands.

How long he chanted I have no idea. It might have been a minute, it might have been an hour, for the clock of eternity seemed stopped as the sonorous voice boomed out the harsh, compelling syllables. But finally it was finished, and I felt de Grandin's hand upon my arm.

"Come away, my friend," he whispered in an awe-struck tone. "The cards are dealt and on the table. The first part of our game of souls is started. *Prie Dieu* that we shall win!"

ALONZO CARDENER was sitting at the little table in his cell, not playing cards, although a pack rested beside the Bible on the clean-scrubbed wood, but merely sitting as though lost in thought, his elbow on his knee, head propped upon his hand. He did not look up as we came abreast of him, but just sat there, staring straight ahead.

"Monsieur," de Grandin hailed. "Monsieur Lonny!" The prisoner looked up, but there was no change of expression in his dull and apathetic face. "We are come from her, from Madame Beth," the Frenchman added softly.

The change which overspread the prisoner's face was like a miracle. It was young again, and bright with eagerness, like a lad in love when some one brings him tidings of his sweetheart. "You've come from her?" he asked incredulously. "Tell me, is she well? Is she——"

"She is well, *mon pauvre,* and happier, since she has told her story to us. We came upon her yesternight by chance, and she has told us all. Now, she asks that we should come to you and bid you be of cheer."

Cardener laughed shortly, with harsh mirthlessness. "Rather difficult, that, for a man in my position," he rejoined, "but——"

"My brother," Doctor Obeyid's deep voice, lowered to a whisper, but still powerful as the muted rumbling of an organ's bass, broke in upon his bitter speech, "you must not despair. Are you afraid to die?"

"Die?" A spasm as of pain twitched across the convict's face. "No, sir; I don't think so. I've faced death many times before, and never was afraid of it; but leaving Beth, now, when I've just found her again, is what hurts most. It's impossible, of course, but if I could only see her once again——"

"You shall," Hussein Obeyid promised. "Little brother, be confident. That door through which you go tonight is the entrance to reunion with the one you love. It is the portal to a new and larger life, and beyond it waits your loved one."

Gray-faced horror spread across the prisoner's countenance. "You—you mean she is already dead?" he faltered. "Oh, Beth, my girl; my dear, my dearest dear——"

"She is not dead; she is alive and well, and waiting for you," Obeyid's deep, compelling voice cut in. "Just beyond that door she waits, my little one. Keep up your courage; you shall surely find her there."

"Oh?" Light seemed to dawn upon the prisoner. "You mean that she'll destroy herself to be with me. No—*no;* she mustn't do it! Suicide's a sin, a deadly sin. I'm going innocent to death; God will judge my innocence, for He knows all, but if she were to kill herself perhaps we should be separated for ever. Tell her

that she mustn't do it; tell her that I beg that she will live until her time has come, and that she'll not forget me while she's waiting; for I'll be waiting, too."

"Look at me," commanded Obeyid suddenly, so suddenly that the frantic man forgot his fears and stopped his protestations short to look with wonder-widened eyes at Hussein Obeyid.

The Oriental raised his staff and held it toward the wire screen the guards had placed before the cell. And as he held it out, *it moved*. Before our eyes that staff of carven wood and ivory became a living, moving thing, twining itself about the doctor's wrist, rearing its head and darting forth its bifurcated tongue. "*Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*—in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate——" murmured Hussein Obeyid, then launched into a low-voiced, vibrant cantillation while the vivified staff writhed and turned its scaly head in cadence to the chant. He did not distort his features as when he cast a spell upon the prisoner's brother; but his face was pale as chiseled marble, and down his high, wide, sloping forehead ran rivulets of sweat as he put the whole force of his soul and mighty body behind the invocation which he chanted.

The look upon the convict's face was mystifying. Twin fires, as of a fever, burned in the depths of his cavernous eyes and his features writhed and twisted as though his soul were racked by the travail of spiritual childbirth. "Beth!" he whispered hoarsely. "Beth!"

I turned apprehensively toward the prison guard who sat immediately behind us. That he had not cried out at the animation of Obeyid's staff and the low-toned invocation of the Oriental ere this surprized me. What I saw surprized me more. The man lounged in his chair, his features dull and disinterested, a look of utter boredom on his face. He saw nothing, heard nothing, noticed nothing!

". . . until tonight, then, little brother," Hussein Obeyid was saying softly. "Remember, and be brave. She will be awaiting you."

"Come," ordered Jules de Grandin, tugging at my sleeve. "The dice are cast. We must wait to read the spots before we can know surely whether we have won."

THEY led him in to die at twenty minutes after ten. Permission to attend the execution had been difficult to get; but Jules de Grandin with his tireless energy and infinite resource had obtained it. Hussein Obeyid, the little Frenchman and I accepted seats at the far end of the stiff-backed church-like pew reserved for witnesses, and I felt a shiver of sick apprehension ripple down my spine as we took our places. To watch beside the bed of one who dies when medical science has exhausted its resources is heart-breaking, but to sit and watch a life snuffed out, to see a strong and healthy body turned to so much clay within the twinkling of an eye—that is horrifying.

The executioner, a lean, cadaverous man who somehow reminded me of a disillusioned evangelist, stood in a tiny alcove to the left of the electric chair, a heavy piece of oaken furniture raised one low step above the tiled floor of the chamber; the assistant warden and the prison doctor stood between the chair and entrance to the death-room, and although this was no novelty to him, I saw the medic finger nervously at the stethoscope which hung about his neck as though it were a badge of office. A partly folded screen at the farther corner of the room obscured another doorway, but as we took our seats I caught a glimpse of a wheeled stretcher with a cotton sheet lying neatly folded on it. Beyond, I knew, waited the autopsy

table and the surgeon's knife when the prison doctor had pronounced the execution a success.

I breathed a strangling, gasping sigh as a single short, imperative tap sounded on the panels of the painted door which led to the death chamber.

Silently, on well-oiled hinges, the door swung back, and Alonzo Cardener stood in readiness to meet the great adventure. His cotton shirt was open at the throat, the right leg of his trousers had been slit up to the knee; as the pitiless white light struck on his head, I saw a little spot was shaved upon his scalp. To right and left were prison guards who held his elbows lightly. Another guard brought up the rear. The chaplain walked before, his Prayer Book open. "*. . . yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me . . .*"

Cardener's eyes were wide and rapt. The fingers of his right hand closed, not convulsively, but tenderly, as though he took and held another's hand in his. His lips moved slightly, and though no sound came from them, we saw them form a name: "Beth!"

They led him to the chair, but he did not seem to see it; they had to help him up the one low step—his last step in the world—or he would have stumbled on it; for his eyes were gazing down an endless vista where he walked at peace with his beloved, hand in hand.

But as they snapped the heavy straps about his waist and wrists and ankles and set the leather helmet on his head, a sudden change came over him. He struggled fiercely at the bonds which held him in the chair, and although his face was almost hidden by the deadly headgear clamped upon his skull, his lips were unobscured, and from them came a wailing cry of horrified astonishment. "Not me!" he screamed. "*Not me—Lonny!* I'm——"

Notebook open, and pencil poised, as though to make a memorandum, the prison doctor stood before the chair. Now, as the convict screamed in frenzied fear, the pencil tilted forward, as though the doctor wrote. A sudden, sharp, strange whining sounded, something throbbed and palpitated agonizingly, like stifled heart-beats. The ghastly, pleading cry was checked abruptly as the prisoner's body started up and forward, as though it sought to burst the leathern bonds which held it. The chin and lips went from pale gray to dusky red, like the face of one who holds his breath too long. The hands, fluttering futilely a moment since, were taut and rigid on the chair arms.

A moment—or eternity!—of this, then the grating jar of metal against metal as the switch was thrown and the current was shut off. The straining body dropped back limply in the chair.

Again the doctor's pencil tilted forward, again the whining whir, and the flaccid body started forward, all but bursting through the broad, strong straps which harnessed it into the chair. Then absolute flaccidity as the current was withdrawn again.

The doctor put his book and pencil by and stepped up quickly to the chair. Putting back the prisoner's open shirt—he wore no undershirt—he pressed his stethoscope against the reddened chest exposed to view, listened silently, then, crisp and business-like, announced his verdict:

"I pronounce this man dead."

White-uniformed attendants took the limp form from the chair, wrapped it quickly in a sheet and wheeled it off to the autopsy table.

We signed the roll of witnesses and hurried from the prison, and:

"Drive, my friend, drive as though the

fiends of fury rode the wind behind us!" ordered Jules de Grandin. "We must arrive at Madame Cardener's without delay. Right away, immediately; at once!"

BETH CARDENER met us at the door, the pallor of her face intensified by the sable hue of the black-velvet pajamas which she wore. "It happened at twenty minutes after ten," she told us as we filed silently into the hall.

De Grandin's small eyes rounded with astonishment as he looked at her. *"Précisément, Madame,"* he acknowledged, "but how is it you know?"

A puzzled look spread on her face as she replied: "Of course, I couldn't sleep—who could, in such circumstances?—and I kept looking at the clock and saying to myself, 'What are they doing to my poor boy now? Is he still in the same world with me?' when I seemed to hear a sort of drumming, whirring noise—something like the deafening vibration you sometimes hear when riding in a motorcar—and then a sudden sharp, agonizing pain shot through me from my head to feet. It was like fire rushing through my veins, burning me to ashes as it ran, and everything went red, then inky-black before my eyes. I felt as if I stifled—no, not that, rather as though every nerve and muscle in my body were suddenly cramping into knots—and at the same time there was a terrible sensation of something from inside me being snatched away in one cruel wrench, as though my heart were dragged out of my breast with a pair of dreadful tongs that burned and seared, even as they tore my quivering body open. If it had lasted, I'd have died, but it left as quickly as it came, and there I was, faint, weak and numb, but suffering no pain, staggering to the window and gasping for breath. As I reached the window I looked up, and a shooting-star fell across the sky. I knew, then; Lonny was no longer in the same world with me. I was lonely, so utterly, devastatingly lonely, that I thought my heart would break. I've never had a child, but if I had one, and it died, I think that I'd feel as I felt the instant that I saw that falling star.

"Then"—she paused, and again that puzzled, wondering look crept into her eyes—"then something, something inside me, like a voice heard in a dream, seemed to say insistently: 'Go to Larry; go to Larry!'

"I didn't want to go; I didn't want to see him or be near him—I loathed the very thought of him, but that strange, compelling voice kept ordering me to go. So I went.

"Larry was sitting in the big chair he always uses in the library. His head had fallen back, and his hands were gripping the arms till the finger-tips bit into the upholstery. His mouth was slightly open and his face was pale as death. I noticed, as I crossed the room, that his feet were well apart, but both flat to the floor. It was"—her voice sank to a husky, frightened whisper—"it was as if *he* were sitting in the death-chair, and had just been executed!"

"U'm, and did you touch him, *Madame?*" de Grandin asked.

"Yes, I did, and his hands were cold—clammy. He was dead. Oh, thank God, he was dead! He murdered his poor brother, just as surely as he killed his father, but he'll never live to boast of it. He died, just as Lonny did, in 'the chair,' only it wasn't human injustice that took his perjured life away; it was the even-handed judgment of just Heaven, and *I'm glad.* I'm glad, do you hear me! I'm glad enough to rush out in the street and tell it to the world; to shout it from the house-tops!"

De Grandin cast a sidelong glance at Hussein Obeyid, who nodded silently. "Perfectly, *Madame,* one understands," the Frenchman answered. "Will you go with us and show us the body? It would be of interest——"

"Yes, yes; I'll show you—I'll be glad to show you!" she broke in shrilly. "Come; this way, please."

Gray-faced, hang-jawed, pale and flaccid as only the dead can be, Lawrence Cardener sat slumped in the big chair beside the book-strewn table. I glanced at him and nodded briefly. No use to make a further examination. No doctor, soldier or embalmer need be introduced to death. He knows it at a glance.

But Hussein Obeyid was not so easily assured. Crossing the room, he bent above the corpse, staring straight into the glazed and sightless eyes and murmuring a sort of chanting invocation. *"Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*—in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate; in the name of the One True God——" He drew a little packet from his waistcoat pocket, broke the seal which closed it and dusted a pinch of whitish powder into the palm of his right hand, then rubbed both hands together quickly, as though laving them with soap. In the shadow where he stood we saw his hands begin to glow, as though they had been smeared with phosphorus, but gradually the glow became a quick and flickering faint-blue light which grew and grew in power till it darted wisps of bluish flame from palms and finger-tips.

He grasped his serpent-headed staff between his glowing hands, and instantly the thing became alive, waving slowly to and fro, darting forth its lambent tongue to touch the dead man's eyes and lips and nostrils. He threw the staff upon the floor, and instantly it was a thing of wood and ivory once again.

Now he pressed fire-framed hands upon the corpse's brow, then bent and ran them up and down the length of the slack limbs, finally poising them above the dead man's *omphalos.* The flame which flickered from his hands curved downward like a blue-green waterfall of fire which seemed to be absorbed by the dead body as water would be soaked in thirsty soil.

And now the flaccid, flabby limbs seemed to tighten, to stretch out jerkily, uneasily, as though awaking from a long, uncomfortable sleep. The lolling head began to oscillate upon the neck, the slack jaw closed, the eyes, a moment since glassy with the vacant stare of death, gave signs of unmistakable vitality.

A shrill, sharp cry broke from Beth Cardener. "He's alive," she screamed, horror and heart-sick disappointment in her voice. "O-oh, he's alive!" She turned reproachful, tear-dimmed eyes on Hussein Obeyid. "Why did you revive him?" she asked accusingly. "He might have died, if you hadn't——"

Her voice broke, smothered in a storm of sobs. Thus far the vibrant hatred of the murderer and her exultation over the swift retribution which had overtaken him had kept her nerve from snapping. Now, the realization that the man whose perfidy had betrayed her trust and her lover's life was still alive broke down her resistance, and she fell, half fainting, on the coach, buried her face in a pillow and gave herself up bodily to retching lamentation.

"Madame," de Grandin's voice was sharp, peremptory; "Madame Beth, come here!"

The woman raised her tear-scarred face and looked at him in wonder. "Come here, quickly, if you please, and tell me what it is you see," he ordered again.

She rose, mechanically, like one who

walks in sleep, and approached the semi-conscious man who slouched in the big chair.

"Behold, observe; *voilà!*" the Frenchman ordered, leaning down and bending Cardener's left ear forward. There, plainly marked and unmistakable, imprinted on the skin above the *retrahens aurem* was a small white cicatrix, a quarter-inch or so in length.

"Oh?" It was a strangling, gasping cry, such as a patient undergoing unanesthetized edentation might give; wonder was in it, and something like fright, as well.

The little Frenchman raised his hand for silence. "He is coming to, *Madame*," he warned in a soft whisper.

Life, indeed, had come back to the shell above which Doctor Obeyid had chanted. Little by little the dread contours of death had receded, and as the hands lost their rigor and lay, half open, on the chair arms, we saw the fingers flexing and extending in an easier, more life-like motion.

"Jodo!" whispered Cardener, rolling his head listlessly from side to side, like one who seeks to rouse himself from an unpleasant dream.

"*Jodo!*" she repeated in an awed and breathless whisper. "*He* never called me that! 'Way back, when we were children, Lonny and I gave each other 'intimate names,' and I never told mine to a soul, not my parents, nor my husband. How——"

"Jodo—Beth dear," the half-unconscious man repeated, his fingers searching gropingly for something. "Are you here? I can't see you, dear, but——"

"*Lonny!*" Incredulous, unbelieving joy was in the woman's tones, and:

"Beth, Beth dearest!" Cardener started forward, eyes opening and closing rapidly, as though he had come suddenly from darkness into light. "Beth, they told me you'd be waiting for me—are you really here?"

"Here! Yes, my dear, my very dearest; I am here!" she cried, and sank down to her knees, gathering his head to her bosom and rocking gently back and forth, as though it were a nursing baby. "Oh, my dear, my dear, however did you come?"

"I'm dead?" he queried timidly. "Is this heaven or——"

"Heaven? Yes, if I and all my love can make it so, my darling!" Beth Cardener broke in, and stopped his wondering queries with her kisses.

"NOW, what the devil does it mean?" I asked as we drove slowly home after taking Doctor Obeyid to his house in Melton Street.

Jules de Grandin raised his elbows, brows and shoulders in a shrug which seemed to say there are some things even a Frenchman can not understand. "You know as much as I, my friend," he returned. "You saw it with your own two eyes. What more is there which I can tell you?"

"A lot of things," I countered. "You said yourself that once before you'd seen——"

"Assuredly I had," he acquiesced. "Me, I see many things, but do I know their meaning? Not always. *Par exemple:* I say to you, 'Friend Trowbridge, I would that you should drive me here or there,' and though you put your foot on certain things and wiggle certain others with your hands, I do not know what you are doing, or why you do it. I only know that the car moves, and that we arrive, at length, where I have wished to go. You comprehend?"

"No, I don't," I answered testily. "I'd like to know how it comes that Lawrence Cardener, who, as we know, was a thor-

ough-going villain, if ever there was one, exchanged, or seemed to exchange personalities with the brother whom he sent to death in the electric chair at the very moment of that brother's execution—and how that scar appeared upon his head. His wife vouched for the fact that it wasn't there before."

The little Frenchman twisted the needle-points of his sharply waxed, wheat-blond mustache until I thought that he would surely prick his finger on them. "I can not say," he answered thoughtfully, "because I do not know. The Arabs have a saying that the soul grows on the body like a flower on the stalk. They may be right. Who knows? What is the soul? Who knows, again? Is it that vague, indefinite thing which we call personality? Perhaps.

"Suppose it is; let us assume the flower-analogy again. Let us assume that, as the skilful gardener takes the blossom from the living rose and grafts it on the living dogwood tree, and thereby makes a rose-tree, one skilled in metaphysics can take the soul from out a body at the instant of dissolution and transplant it to another body from which the soul has just decamped, and thereby create a new and different individual, composed of two distinct parts, a soul, or personality, if you please, and a body, neither of which was originally complementary to the other. It sounds strange, insane, but so would talk of total anesthesia or radio have sounded two hundred years ago. As for the scar, that is comparatively simple. You have seen persons under hypnotism lose every drop of blood from one arm or hand, or become completely anemic in one side of the face; you know from medical history, though you may not have seen it, that certain hysterical religious persons develop what are called stigmata—simulations of the bleeding wounds of the Savior or the martyred saints. That is mental in inception, but physical in manifestation, *n'est-ce-pas?* Why, then, could not an outward and physical sign of personality be transferred as easily as the inward and spiritual reality? *Pardieu,* I damn think that it could!"

"But will this 'spiritual graft' endure?" I wondered. "Will this transformation of Larry Cardener into Lonny Cardener last?"

"*Le bon Dieu* knows," he answered. "Me, I most greatly hope so. If it does not, I shall have to make my promise good and give her that mercuric cyanide. Time will tell."

TIME did. A year had passed, and the final summer hop was being given at the Sedgemoor Country Club. The white walls of the clubhouse shone like an illuminated monument in the dusky blue of the late-September night, lights blazed from every window and colored globes decorated the overhanging roofs of the broad verandas which stretched along the front and rear of the building. In the grounds Chinese lanterns gleamed with rose, blue, violet and jade, rivaling the brilliance of the summer stars. Jazz blared from the commodious ballroom and echoed from the big yellow-and-red striped marquee set up by the first green. Jules de Grandin and I sat on the front piazza and rocked comfortably in wide wicker chairs, the ice-cubes in our tall glasses clinking pleasantly.

"*Mordieu,* my friend," the Frenchman exclaimed enthusiastically, "this what do you call him? zhu-leep?—he is divine; magnificent. He is superb; I would I had a tubful of him in which to drown my few remaining sorrows!" He sucked appreciatively at the twin straws thrust between the feathery mint-stalks, then, abruptly: "*Mort de ma vie,* my friend,

look—behold them!" He pointed up excitedly.

From where we sat a little balcony projecting from the upper floor was plainly in our line of vision. As the little Frenchman pointed, I saw a man arrayed in summer dancing-clothes, step out upon the platform and light a cigarette. As he snapped his lighter shut, he raised his left hand and brushed his short, close-cropped mustache with the knuckle of his bent forefinger. He blew a long cone of gray smoke between his lips, and turned to some one in the room behind him. As the light struck on his face, I recognized him. It was Lawrence Cardener, beyond a doubt, but Lawrence Cardener strangely altered. His hair, once iron-gray, was now almost uniformly brown, save where a single streak of white ran, plume-like, backward from his forehead.

A woman joined him on the balcony. She was tall, slender, dark; her little, piquant face framed in clusters of curling ringlets. Her lips were red and smiling, her lovely arms and shoulders were exposed by the extreme décolleté of her white-crêpe evening gown. I knew her; Beth Cardener, but a different woman from the one whose suicide we had balked twelve months before. This Beth was younger, more girlish in face and carriage, and plainly, she was happy. He turned and offered her his case, then, as she chose a cigarette, extended his lighter. She drew the smoke into her lungs, expelled a fine stream from her mouth, then tossed the cigarette away. As it fell to earth in a gleaming, fiery arc, the man tossed his out after it and put his hands upon her shoulders. Her own white hands, fluttering like homing doves, flew upward, clasped about his neck, and drew his face to hers. Their lips approached and merged in a long, rapturous kiss.

"Tête bleu, my friend," de Grandin cried, "I damn think I can keep my mercuric cyanide; she has no use for it, that one!" He rose, a thought unsteadily, and beckoned me. "Come, let us leave them to each other and their happiness," he ordered. "Me, I very greatly desire several more of those so noble saint shuleeps. Yes."

What Is It?

By CHARLES M. MORRIS

Retribution, swift and terrible, struck the man who had committed the sin of Cain

I AM almost mad; madness has touched my brain, and when you hear my story your flesh will creep in horror. For there is something creeping upon me, which, like the stealthy stalk of a giant cat, comes slowly out of the darkness upon me, then will pounce, with an awful swiftness, to finish me. My only hope is that the bony fingers of insanity will clutch out and tear away the remaining strands of my mind. Then I shall become a howling, screaming thing—to be

taken, none too gently, away from here. But I am afraid it will be too late. There is something else . . . God knows I feel fear; it is the torture of fear that has made my mind grow strange.

I am in this big, silent room, with its dark, crimson drapes and its musty walls. There is but little light filtering through the dim windows. Along the wall stands a low, heavy table. Stretched out upon it is a figure covered by a white sheet. It is the body of my friend, Victor Bedard. He is dead, dead—with a knife in his heart. I have slain him, with my own hands. See, the stains of his blood are still on them. Horror of horrors! There is even blood spilled down my waistcoat.

We both loved Marie, my wife. She died yesterday, with his name on her lips. And so I killed him, that his black soul might join her in the horrid hell their sin has prepared for them.

Why don't they come, the officers, and take away that hideous corpse? I again cross the room, and lift the sheet from Victor's face. Ah! The eyes are still open, staring. . . . The lips, too, are parted, as they parted in his death agony. Why will they not come for me, and this staring thing on the table? I have sent word to them I have killed my friend, Victor Bedard. Perhaps they won't come for an hour—for a day. Perhaps—and this is what I fear—perhaps they won't need to come!

It is a nameless thing that I fear. It is not death, nor the human punishment that will be inflicted upon me for this deed. Nor do I fear madness. Insanity, if it comes, will be a blessing. It is something else which I can not name of which I am afraid. And it is right here in this room with me, now.

What is it? It is like nothing in heaven or earth. It is part of that foul darkness that borders on nothing. It is a creature from out of the hell of hells that I fear. The room appears empty, except for this body and myself. I can not feel it; I can not see it; but I know it is here.

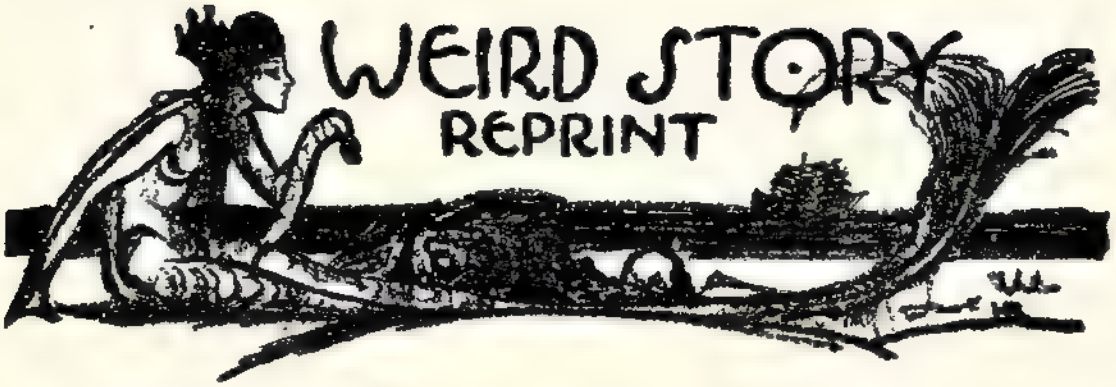
If only madness would seize me, or some one would come to take me away! Away from the terror of this room! I can not replace the sheet over Victor's twisted face. I need the company of even this cold body. I tear the sheet entirely away. He lies there with his legs spread out and his hands stiffly clutching nothing. The knife is buried to the hilt in his breast.

But there is that thing again! I can almost feel it brush me. I can hear, faintly, the sound of horrible laughter. I seize the hilt of the imbedded knife, and tug at it. It comes away, dripping dark blood. "Present yourself, Fiend of Darkness, but you shall not have me!"

There! What was that? It is the drip, drip, drip of blood coming along the floor! Coming toward me from the door! Each drip leaves a little dark pool where it strikes. Coming straight toward me with a slow drip, drip. I can just make them out from the shadows in the room. What is it?

I raise the knife, with the point at my breast. I am listening, for the last time, to the gay sound of voices in the street outside—to the clatter of cars. It is growing darker.

"Ah! I see you now. Victor! You fiend! It is you!"



The Night Wire*

By H. F. ARNOLD

"NEW YORK, September 30 CP FLASH

"Ambassador Holliwell died here today. The end came suddenly as the ambassador was alone in his study. . . ."

There is something ungodly about these night wire jobs. You sit up here on the top floor of a skyscraper and listen in to the whispers of a civilization. New York, London, Calcutta, Bombay, Singapore—they're your next-door neighbors after the street lights go dim and the world has gone to sleep.

Along in the quiet hours between two and four, the receiving operators doze over their sounders and the news comes in. Fires and disasters and suicides. Murders, crowds, catastrophes. Sometimes an earthquake with a casualty list as long as your arm. The night wire man takes it down almost in his sleep, picking it off on his typewriter with one finger.

Once in a long time you prick up your ears and listen. You've heard of some one you knew in Singapore, Halifax or Paris, long ago. Maybe they've been promoted, but more probably they've been murdered or drowned. Perhaps they just decided to quit and took some bizarre way out. Made it interesting enough to get in the news.

But that doesn't happen often. Most of the time you sit and doze and tap, tap on your typewriter and wish you were home in bed.

Sometimes, though, queer things happen. One did the other night, and I haven't got over it yet. I wish I could.

You see, I handle the night manager's desk in a western seaport town; what the name is, doesn't matter.

There is, or rather was, only one night operator on my staff, a fellow named John Morgan, about forty years of age, I should say, and a sober, hard-working sort.

He was one of the best operators I ever knew, what is known as a "double" man. That means he could handle two instruments at once and type the stories on different typewriters at the same time. He was one of the three men I ever knew who could do it consistently, hour after hour, and never make a mistake.

Generally we used only one wire at night, but sometimes when it was late and

* From WEIRD TALES for September, 1926.

the news was coming fast, the Chicago and Denver stations would open a second wire, and then Morgan would do his stuff. He was a wizard, a mechanical automatic wizard which functioned marvelously but was without imagination.

On the night of the sixteenth he complained of feeling tired. It was the first and last time I had ever heard him say a word about himself, and I had known him for three years.

It was just three o'clock and we were running only one wire. I was nodding over reports at my desk and not paying much attention to him, when he spoke.

"Jim," he said, "does it feel close in here to you?"

"Why, no, John," I answered, "but I'll open a window if you like."

"Never mind," he said. "I reckon I'm just a little tired."

That was all that was said, and I went on working. Every ten minutes or so I would walk over and take a pile of copy that had stacked up neatly beside the typewriter as the messages were printed out in triplicate.

It must have been twenty minutes after he spoke that I noticed he had opened up the other wire and was using both typewriters. I thought it was a little unusual, as there was nothing very "hot" coming in. On my next trip I picked up the copy from both machines and took it back to my desk to sort out the duplicates.

The first wire was running out the usual sort of stuff and I just looked over it hurriedly. Then I turned to the second pile of copy. I remembered it particularly because the story was from a town I had never heard of: "Xebico." Here is the dispatch. I saved a duplicate of it from our files:

"Xebico, Sept 16 CP BULLETIN

"The heaviest mist in the history of the city settled over the town at 4 o'clock yesterday afternoon. All traffic has stopped and the mist hangs like a pall over everything. Lights of ordinary intensity fail to pierce the fog, which is constantly growing heavier.

"Scientists here are unable to agree as to the cause, and the local weather bureau states that the like has never occurred before in the history of the city.

"At 7 p. m. last night municipal authorities——

(more)"

That was all there was. Nothing out of the ordinary at a bureau headquarters, but, as I say, I noticed the story because of the name of the town.

IT MUST have been fifteen minutes later that I went over for another batch of copy. Morgan was slumped down in his chair and had switched his green electric light shade so that the gleam missed his eyes and hit only the top of the two typewriters.

Only the usual stuff was in the right-hand pile, but the left-hand batch carried another story from Xebico. All press dispatches come in "takes," meaning that parts of many different stories are strung along together, perhaps with but a few paragraphs of each coming through at a time. This second story was marked "add fog." Here is the copy:

"At 7 p. m. the fog had increased noticeably. All lights were now invisible and the town was shrouded in pitch darkness.

"As a peculiarity of the phenomenon, the fog is accompanied by a sickly odor, comparable to nothing yet experienced here."

Below that in customary press fashion was the hour, 3:27, and the initials of the operator, JM.

There was only one other story in the pile from the second wire. Here it is:

"2nd add Xebico Fog

"Accounts as to the origin of the mist differ greatly. Among the most unusual is that of the sexton of the local church, who groped his way to headquarters in a hysterical condition and declared that the fog originated in the village churchyard.

" 'It was first visible as a soft gray blanket clinging to the earth above the graves,' he stated. 'Then it began to rise, higher and higher. A subterranean breeze seemed to blow it in billows, which split up and then joined together again.

" 'Fog phantoms, writhing in anguish, twisted the mist into queer forms and figures. And then, in the very thick midst of the mass, something moved.

" 'I turned and ran from the accursed spot. Behind me I heard screams coming from the houses bordering on the graveyard.'

"Although the sexton's story is generally discredited, a party has left to investigate. Immediately after telling his story, the sexton collapsed and is now in a local hospital, unconscious."

. Queer story, wasn't it? Not that we aren't used to it, for a lot of unusual stories come in over the wire. But for some reason or other, perhaps because it was so quiet that night, the report of the fog made a great impression on me.

It was almost with dread that I went over to the waiting piles of copy. Morgan did not move, and the only sound in the room was the tap-tap of the sounders. It was ominous, nerve-racking.

There was another story from Xebico in the pile of copy. I seized on it anxiously.

"New Lead Xebico Fog CP

"The rescue party which went out at 11 p. m. to investigate a weird story of the origin of a fog which, since late yesterday, has shrouded the city in darkness, has failed to return. Another and larger party has been dispatched.

"Meanwhile the fog has, if possible, grown heavier. It seeps through the cracks in the doors and fills the atmosphere with a depressing odor of decay. It is oppressive, terrifying, bearing with it a subtle impression of things long dead.

"Residents of the city have left their homes and gathered in the local church, where the priests are holding services of prayer. The scene is beyond description. Grown folk and children are alike terrified and many are almost beside themselves with fear.

"Amid the wisps of vapor which partly veil the church auditorium, an old priest is praying for the welfare of his flock. They alternately wail and cross themselves.

"From the outskirts of the city may be heard cries of unknown voices. They echo through the fog in queer uncadenced minor keys. The sounds resemble nothing so much as wind whistling through a gigantic tunnel. But the night is calm and there is no wind. The second rescue party—— (more)"

I AM a calm man and never in a dozen years spent with the wires have been known to become excited, but despite myself I rose from my chair and walked to the window.

Could I be mistaken, or far down in the canyons of the city beneath me did I see a faint trace of fog? Pshaw! It was all imagination.

In the pressroom the click of the sounders seemed to have raised the tempo of their tune. Morgan alone had not stirred from his chair. His head sunk between his shoulders, he tapped the dispatches out on the typewriters with one finger of each hand.

He looked asleep. Maybe he was—

but no; endlessly, efficiently, the two machines rattled off line after line, as relentlessly and effortlessly as death itself. There was something about the monotonous movement of the typewriter keys that fascinated me. I walked over and stood behind his chair, reading over his shoulder the type as it came into being, word by word.

Ah, here was another:

"Flash Xebico C P

"There will be no more bulletins from this office. The impossible has happened. No messages have come into this room for twenty minutes. We are cut off from the outside and even the streets below us.

"I will stay with the wire until the end.

"It is the end, indeed. Since 4 p. m. yesterday the fog has hung over the city. Following reports from the sexton of the local church, two rescue parties were sent out to investigate conditions on the outskirts of the city. Neither party has ever returned nor was any word received from them. It is quite certain now that they will never return.

"From my instrument I can gaze down on the city beneath me. From the position of this room on the thirteenth floor, nearly the entire city can be seen. Now I can see only a thick blanket of blackness where customarily are lights and life.

"I fear greatly that the wailing cries heard constantly from the outskirts of the city are the death cries of the inhabitants. They are constantly increasing in volume and are approaching the center of the city.

"The fog yet hangs over everything. If possible, it is even heavier than before, but the conditions have changed. Instead of an opaque, impenetrable wall of odorous vapor, there now swirls and writhes a shapeless mass in contortions of almost human agony. Now and again the mass parts and I catch a brief glimpse of the streets below.

"People are running to and fro, screaming in despair. A vast bedlam of sound flies up to my window, and above all is the immense whistling of unseen and unfelt winds.

"The fog has again swept over the city and the whistling is coming closer and closer.

"It is now directly beneath me.

"God! An instant ago the mist opened and I caught a glimpse of the streets below.

"The fog is not simply vapor—it lives! By the side of each moaning and weeping human is a companion figure, an aura of strange and vari-colored hues. How the shapes cling! Each to a living thing!

"The men and women are down. Flat on their faces. The fog figures caress them lovingly. They are kneeling beside them. They are—but I dare not tell it.

"The prone and writhing bodies have been stripped of their clothing. They are being consumed—piecemeal.

"A merciful wall of hot, steamy vapor has swept over the whole scene. I can see no more.

"Beneath me the wall of vapor is changing colors. It seems to be lighted by internal fires. No, it isn't. I have made a mistake. The colors are from above, reflections from the sky.

"Look up! Look up! The whole sky is in flames. Colors as yet unseen by man or demon. The flames are moving; they have started to intermix; the colors rearrange themselves. They are so brilliant that my eyes burn, yet they are a long way off.

"Now they have begun to swirl, to circle in and out, twisting in intricate designs and patterns. The lights are racing each with each, a kaleidoscope of unearthly brilliance.

"I have made a discovery. There is nothing harmful in the lights. They radiate force and friendliness, almost cheeriness. But by their very strength, they hurt.

"As I look, they are swinging closer and closer, a million miles at each jump. Millions of miles with the speed of light. Aye, it is light, the quintessence of all light. Beneath it the fog melts into a jeweled mist, radiant, rainbow-colored of a thousand varied spectra.

"I can see the streets. Why, they are filled with people! The lights are coming closer. They are all around me. I am enveloped. I——"

THE message stopped abruptly. The wire to Xebico was dead. Beneath my eyes in the narrow circle of light from under the green lamp-shade, the black printing no longer spun itself, letter by letter, across the page.

The room seemed filled with a solemn quiet, a silence vaguely impressive, powerful.

I looked down at Morgan. His hands had dropped nervelessly at his sides, while his body had hunched over peculiarly. I turned the lamp-shade back, throwing the light squarely in his face. His eyes were staring, fixed.

Filled with a sudden foreboding, I stepped beside him and called Chicago on the wire. After a second the sounder clicked its answer.

Why? But there was something wrong. Chicago was reporting that Wire Two had not been used throughout the evening.

"Morgan!" I shouted. "Morgan! Wake up, it isn't true. Some one has been hoaxing us. Why——" In my eagerness I grasped him by the shoulder.

His body was quite cold. Morgan had been dead for hours. Could it be that his sensitized brain and automatic fingers had continued to record impressions even after the end?

I shall never know, for I shall never again handle the night shift. Search in a world atlas discloses no town of Xebico. Whatever it was that killed John Morgan will for ever remain a mystery.

Coming Next Month

ALL my senses alert, I crept toward the barely open door. I listened, straining my ears, but I heard no sound. The door was not sufficiently ajar for me to see within. Cautiously I opened it wider; and then I forgot caution at the scene that met my startled stare.

A stooping figure crouched over Tomasine's bed, its back toward the door. The bending figure was shrouded in white, and there was something in its attitude that chilled me as I looked. Over all the scene the ghostly moonlight flooded.

I saw that the intruder was a woman, but I did not then perceive why that realization should send fresh shivers along my back. Whoever this intruder, she had no right to be there. Whatever her motive—suddenly, dread intuition prompting, I gave a hoarse cry. The crouching figure whirled, and I cried out again, with horror in my voice. I was gazing into a pair of flaming eyes!

"What are you doing here?" I demanded harshly.

The white, dead face smiled, and the smile was more dreadful than any grimace of hate. The eyes, curiously lifeless and yet at the same time lit with a cold, feral glare —those eyes burned into mine, held me spellbound and helpless. I knew, in that awful moment, that here was a horror that had no right to walk the earth. And I stood helpless, bound by the grip of those hellish orbs. The white-shrouded thing glided toward me. Pallid arms reached out, white hands that were too white, with long slender fingers, reached under my chin . . . to bend back my head . . .

This novelette by the author of *Placide's Wife* is a fascinating goose-flesh story that is utterly different. It will be published complete in the next issue of WEIRD TALES:

De Brignac's Lady

By KIRK MASHBURN

—ALSO—

THE CHADBOURNE EPISODE
By HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

A shuddery graveyard tale of ghastly shapes glimpsed in the moonlight—of little, reddish, half-gnawed bones, scattered about the tomb in the Old Cemetery.

THE FIRE VAMPIRES
By DONALD WANDREI

Out of the sky struck a dread electric scourge that burned the life out of countless thousands and left charred skeletons to mark its passing.

THE MIRROR
By GEORGE BURROWES

A strange story of a weird happening in the depths of a looking-glass, and an eery catastrophe that destroyed the happiness of two people.

THE CULT OF THE WHITE APE
By HUGH B. CAVE

An eldritch story of blackest Africa, where strange occult magic is still worked—a horror-story of the Dark Continent.

THE HEAD OF WU-FANG
By DON C. WILEY

The tale of a Chinese mandarin who exacted a fearful punishment on those who had brought him to death.

February WEIRD TALES Out January 1

READERS, just how well do you like interplanetary stories? Shall WEIRD TALES continue to publish stories of space-ships, and voyages to other worlds, and eery adventures in far corners of the galaxy? We ask these questions because the featuring of Otis Adelbert Kline's serial, *Buccaneers of Venus*, has called forth several letters vigorously attacking interplanetary stories in general and Mr. Kline's story in particular; and the same thing happens whenever we print any of Edmond Hamilton's space thrillers. Though the chorus of praise almost drowns out the hymn of hate, and the enthusiastic letters lauding Mr. Kline's story greatly outnumber the complaints, still the latter are sufficiently numerous to warrant us in putting the question up to you: Do you want us to keep on publishing such tales as Mr. Kline's *Buccaneers of Venus* and Mr. Hamilton's *Crashing Suns*, or shall we omit interplanetary tales entirely? So far, those of you who dislike such stories are a small minority of our readers, if we can judge by the letters sent in to the Eyrie; but the very vigor of the protests compels attention. We have insisted on two things in our science-fiction: first, that such stories must be thrilling and packed with interest; and, second, that they must be not merely scientific or pseudo-scientific, but must also be eery enough to class as *weird-scientific*. Unless those of you who dislike such stories let us know your wishes in no uncertain terms, we shall continue to vary our contents by including in each issue two or more of the best weird-scientific stories obtainable.

W. Davis, of Brooklyn, writes to the Eyrie: "I have read every copy of WEIRD TALES since 1925, and until recently the magazine has been perfect. Lately, however, you have been publishing an increasing number of interplanetary stories. These stories are well written, but they are not weird. Stick to the elder gods of Earth. For six years I sailed the seven seas, and in that time came to the conclusion that there are sufficient strange, weird and unexplainable happenings on this old ball to keep the hair of the reading public on end without the necessity of going to Mars or Venus. I like my WEIRD TALES to be *weird*. If a story doesn't give me the jitters for twenty-four hours after reading it, I don't like it. Scientific fiction is about as exciting as the works of Samuel Johnson."

Here comes a hard wallop to the chin, delivered by Mrs. Norawcee De Hart, of Auburn, Indiana: "I am really disappointed to find so much precious space taken up by another of Otis Adelbert Kline's creations. This is another story of the type that surely can not interest any one but the adolescent, and is really out of place in your publication, for it is certainly not weird. Please give us fewer serials of this type, and

(Please turn to page 140)

NEW BIG MONEY FIELD

FOR

WIDE AWAKE MEN!

SELLING NEW SPECIALTY to BUSINESS and PROFESSIONAL MEN

Four $15 Sales Daily Pay $280 Weekly

When green men, with just average ability, make $200 to $400 a week, and up, our proposition must be worth investigating. We train you, giving you successful methods of one of the fastest sales forces in the country. If you are looking for a man-size business, free from worries of other overcrowded lines of work, write for full information.

WORLD'S LARGEST

Firms Among Our Customers: Sears Roebuck, Larkin Company, Loftis Bros. and Company, National Radio, Dodd, Mead and Co., Collier's, National Brake Service, Inc., Advance-Rumely Thresher Co., and scores of others nationally known are among our customers. It's a life saver for the smallest merchant who needs it even more than the big firm and he buys quick two sizes—one costs $2.50—sells $7.50; your profit $5, and more, as your sales increase. Other size costs $5—sells $15—your profit $10 and more—every salesman working regularly makes close to $12.00 profit per sale on this size! Think of that!

GUARANTEED

To Bring Customer Ten Times Its Cost in Actual Cash

Customer gets signed certificate of guarantee protecting him, backed by a national organization. Very few business men are so foolish as to turn down a proposition guaranteed to pay 10 for one, with proof from leading concerns of the world that it does pay.

Here's What Our Men Make

$400 Weekly!

Between Sept. 4th and Sept. 16th—just 2 weeks—E. D. Perrell, of Atlanta, Ga., cleaned up $882 50 on his first orders. His sales were all made in 3 small Georgia towns. His customers are reordering and he is going strong.

EDDIE FOYER

$4920 in 3 Months

California rings the bell again! E. Foyer starts out April 1st and by July 1st he has 410 $15 sales to his credit. Multiply 410 by $12 profit and you've got something to show you the money in this proposition.

ARTHUR FRIEDMAN

$105 Profit on 1 Sub-Agent Sale

Besides his own profits—$1,260 00 clear in 23 days—Friedman, Wisconsin, gets a $105 bonus on a single sale made by one of his sub-agents! It's all in selling the right thing, boys!

$165 First Day!

Made by R. H. Walker—Georgia—Made one sale to a Columbus, Georgia, organization, and that sale got him 4 more sales within a few hours. Met another salesman, and the other salesman bought him out! That's the kind of proposition this is.

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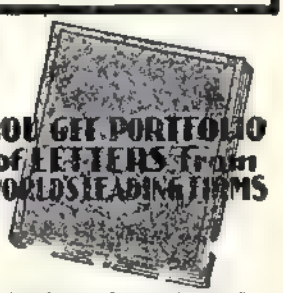
Write for Other Salesmen's Reports

We can send them as fast as you can read 'em. We've got plenty! See for yourself. Mail the coupon for further details.



YOU GET PORTFOLIO of LETTERS from WORLD'S LEADING FIRMS

A handsome, impressive portfolio that contains letters from the world's most famous concerns. Every type of business and profession represented. You have immediate, positive proof of success. They can't say—"doesn't fit my business." Nails 'em right then and there. Sells them on sight.

BE SURE TO READ THIS

Remember, this is no ordinary proposition. You deal with a company that doesn't split pennies, headed by a man who spent 16 years on the road. A company with a record you can be proud of as our representative. Get the facts—see with your own eyes what you can make in this business. Mail the coupon for full information.

SURETY Company's BOND Protects Customer

Your customer is entitled to the service of a national organization bonded by a Surety Company with assets running into the millions. He CAN'T lose. You are able to show positive safety. This means quick sales and big turn-over for you.

Seeing Is Believing...Mail Coupon for Proof

This is a business with a future to it. Enormous repeat business. Tremendous profits from sub-agents—your sub-agents have more margin than total profit on 99 out of 100 other specialties. You get profit on all mail order business from your territory. Every customer is a prospect for two or three times the initial amount on your second call. Every customer recommends others to you. If you get ready to quit, you have an established route that can be sold like any other business. An opportunity to make $5,000 to $10,000 a year is worth while. Just a limited number of openings. Hurry, boys—they won't be left long now!

F. E. ARMSTRONG, Pres., Dept. 4060-E, Mobile, Ala.

SEND ME FULL INFORMATION, MR. ARMSTRONG

F. E. Armstrong, Pres., Dept. 4060-E, Mobile, Ala.
Without obligation to me, send me full information on your proposition.

Name_____

Street or Route_____

Box No._____

City_____ State_____

(Continued from page 138)

more shuddery horror stories, witch sagas, black magic, etc. Leave the Edgar Rice Burroughs type of tale to others. I dislike leaving any story in your issues unread, but it taxes me to try to include this. Please!"

In justice to Mr. Kline it should be said that the boosts for his story greatly outnumber the knocks. Here is one of the letters of praise; it comes from Robert Nelson, of St. Charles, Illinois: "May my pen act as a reed to pipe my most culminant eulogiums to Clark Ashton Smith, that master-painter of weird literature? His tales appearing in W. T. have been impeccable gems, truly worthy of settings in the classics. I shall never forget his *A Rendezvous in Averoigne.* Otis Adelbert Kline transcends by far the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs and has surely supplanted him. One forms this judgment with certitude after reading the opening installment of his *Buccaneers of Venus,* which outshines all the other stories appearing in the November WEIRD TALES."

"Please do not reprint any more serials," requests Donald A. Wolheim, of New York City. "We want to see some of the masterpieces that appeared in the old issues of WEIRD TALES. And the first I want to see is A. Merritt's *The Woman of the Wood.*"

"The November issue of WEIRD TALES was a real treat," writes Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C. "I enjoyed every story in it. As for my selections of first, second and third places, I award them to the first part of *Buccaneers of Venus, Spawn of the Shadows,* and *Vampire Village,* respectively. Let us have more good stories like these. My vote on serial reprints is positively no. I would, however, appreciate it greatly if you would reprint complete stories from the now unobtainable early issues of WEIRD TALES. Here's a weird tale that's true. Yesterday (Sunday, October 16, 1932) I was riding on the Lee Highway in Virginia when all of a sudden I heard a whistle like that of a train. It came from in front, it passed by the car, and continued to sound. Other people in the car with me heard the whistle. When it seemed to be passing by us, I stopped the car, but the whistle seemed to continue down the road. At the time of this whistle there was not another car on the road, either in front or behind. We were not near any house or village and there wasn't a railroad within thirty miles of the spot. Somebody may have discovered the secret of invisibility and was putting it to use with an automobile or something, but whatever the truth may be, it is the weirdest incident that has ever occurred near me."

Jack Williamson writes from his home in New Mexico: "The St. John cover for *Buccaneers of Venus* is fine—the best picture, I think, that I have seen, involving an imaginary monster. The human figure is superb, and the ship, the sail, and the wild sea give an impression of Viking daring. As for the reprint question, my vote is for the less known short stories, particularly from the early issues of WEIRD TALES. Let me also express my enjoyment of the peculiar fantastic humor in such of Clark Ashton Smith's stories as *The Testament of Athammaus.*"

"The stories in WEIRD TALES are the best I have ever come across, and I read every magazine of its kind I can find," writes Mrs. H. W. Paylor, of San Francisco, in a letter to the Eyrie. "Keep up the good work, and let's have more stories like those in the last issue. They were the best yet."

(Please turn to page 142)

GUESTS FROM AFAR

Particular people from all over the world make Detroit-Leland their home in Detroit. The luxury and magnificence of this famous hotel are yours at ordinary hotel cost.

Now Baker Operated. The hospitality that has made the Baker name famous everywhere is yours at the Detroit-Leland

HOTEL DETROIT-LELAND

800 ROOMS 800 BATHS

SINGLE..$2.50 AND UP DOUBLE..$3.50 AND UP

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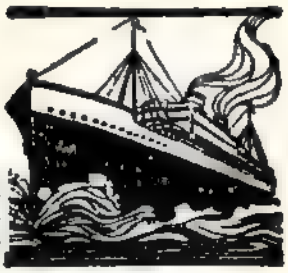

DETROIT

Send for this amazing BIG DREAM BOOK AND FORTUNE TELLER, telling the meaning of almost any dream; also how to tell fortune by cards, tea leaves, dominoes, nails, moles, palmistry, astrology. Gives "lucky" numbers and days. Curious Ancient Beliefs, Moon Judgments, Signs, Omens. Contains Napoleon's Oracle of Fate, Weather Wisdom, Secret Writing, Fun, Magic and Mystery; Face Reading; Signs of Luck; How to Hypnotize; Horoscopes; Crystal Gazing; Money Making Secrets. How to be lucky in Love; card games, etc. Also $500.00 Prize Contest. Most complete book of this kind ever printed.

Sent FREE to advertise Dr. Jayne's world-famous household remedies, America's Pioneer Medicines, sold for 101 years. But please send 10 cents (stamps or dime) to help pay the cost of this notice, packing and mailing. DR. D. JAYNE & SON, Inc., 3 Vine St., Phila., Pa. Dept. D-55.

SECRET SERVICE

We Want Men and Women of Average School Education, gifted with common sense, to study Secret Service and Scientific Crime Detection. If in this class and interested, write Joseph A. Kavanagh, Former Agent, U. S. Secret Service, Director, International Secret Service Institute, Dept. W T-12, 65 Hudson St., Hoboken, N. J.

BACK ISSUES

For complete list and prices write to WEIRD TALES, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

(Continued from page 140)

"I am an omnivorous reader of WEIRD TALES," writes Otto J. Precht, of Bellmore, New York, "and I keenly relish the tales written by Mr. E. Hoffmann Price. I greatly enjoyed his fine story of the *Bride of the Peacock,* which was certainly a story to hold one's interest. But lately I have not seen many stories by Mr. Price. After his first story was published I was so entranced that I looked forward with zest to his stories in WEIRD TALES; but lately he has not appeared, except for the one story, *Bride of the Peacock.* I am wondering why you do not run some more of his stories. I look for a story by Mr. Price every time I purchase your magazine at the news stand, but lately I have been keenly disappointed." [Cheer up, Mr. Precht, for we will publish many more splendid stories by Mr. Price, both in WEIRD TALES and in its sister magazine, the MAGIC CARPET Magazine.—THE EDITORS.]

Alan MacRobert, of Larchmont, New York, asks for "more stories of witches and witchcraft and not so much ghost stuff. That," he adds, "seems to be my one complaint."

J. D. Arden, of Detroit, writes to the Eyrie: "In your November issue, I noted with pleasure the one improvement needed to make the magazine perfect: the illustrations. I also must say that the present illustrations are vastly superior to those of the last five or six issues. A pat on the back for artists St. John and M. W. The stories are of high caliber, and with four aces of WEIRD TALES represented in Howard, Quinn, Kline and Smith, the issue is very good."

Readers, let us know what stories you like best in this issue. And if there are any stories you do not like, we want to know that, also. The most popular story in the November issue, as shown by your letters and votes, was Robert E. Howard's eery thriller, *Worms of the Earth.* The first installment of Otis Adelbert Kline's serial, *Buccaneers of Venus,* was second, with Seabury Quinn's story, *The Bleeding Mummy,* in third place.

My favorite stories in the January WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	Why?----------
(2)----------	----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

The Monsters

(Continued from page 30)

"Danny!" she cried. "Come on! Come on!"

"Just a moment," said Danny. "Let me present you with the Empire State Building. I'm taking the Chrysler Building for Tommy and the Metropolitan Museum for Dick. . . ."

Seconds later they dashed out of the door as flames began to roar furiously behind them. And Danny stuffed certain fragile but perfect miniatures of giant buildings into his pockets as the commanding officer of the expedition staggered up to him. He was horribly mauled and torn.

"You—you got them?" he asked thickly. "We were—fighting the damned Monsters. Half my men are killed. More than half. But the Monsters vanished. . . . You got them?"

"We did," said Danny grimly. "We smashed up the whole outfit, killed two men and——"

Anne wavered a little on her feet and went off into a dead faint. And Danny dropped all other matters to attend to her.

EVERYBODY knows what happened next. The Monsters disappeared from New York as the laboratory on the hilltop was smashed. Danny and Dick and Tommy Burns were heroes, because they alone — with Anne — had won through the defending hordes of Monsters and smashed the Monster-makers' projector. And Dick, having swept photographs and papers from a desk in the power-station, produced documents which told of the immediate purposes of the sinister geniuses who had built and operated that place. Their immediate purpose

DON'T
PLAY BLIND MAN'S BUFF
WITH YOUR LIFE

Why reach out blindly toward the things that constitute REAL HAPPINESS in life? If you are depending on opportunities to make themselves known to you, by waiting to hear, see, or fe[el] them, then you are letting the future slip by. [Y]ou can create in your life, through the direction of your INNER FORCES, those things that your outer self has been blindly seeking. Edison's greatest inventions were conceived IN THE MIND, not in the eye or sense of touch.

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was, of course, a vast hold-up. The City of New York was to be held to ransom. The letter making the demands of the Monster-makers was ready to mail, and it is on display in the Metropolitan Museum together with the tiny metal replica of the Chrysler Building and the Museum itself. Nobody knows how those models were made, except that Danny has suggested that if one projected a magnetic-field image of a city and then poured molten metal into its hollow interior, if the metal were sufficiently fluid it would produce a perfect casting of the city. That is probably as good a guess as any.

But nobody knows—yet—how the Monsters were made. There is just one clue available. When Danny gave Anne the Empire State Building—some four inches tall—he put something else very carefully into a box lined with cotton-wool. Later, he put that away in a safe-deposit box which he rented at the extravagant outlay of seven dollars for the year. And Anne knows what is in the other box and why he put it away. That is the clue to the method of making the Monsters. She kissed Danny rather more worshipfully than usual when he explained it to her. . . .

Oh, yes. That was quite all right. You remember, of course, that pictures of Danny and Dick and Tommy Burns were in the papers for three days running, so that they became national heroes. But Danny's engagement to Anne wasn't announced until nearly two months later. And then, of course, he wasn't news any longer. The announcement filled four lines under a twelve-point head on page eight of the *Tabloid*. It fitted in neatly under the carry-over of a second-page story Danny had written. And that story went under the headline, "LOVE NEST RAID BARES RUM KING'S DOUBLE LIFE."

LAYLA was suddenly interrupted by a muffled scream from one of the slave-girls, who came hurrying across the room with my female clothing. "The master is coming!" she cried.

With the aid of the slave-girl and Layla I quickly donned the garments, then bent over my astrological table and began muttering calculations in the cracked voice of an old hag.

The door opened, and I saw a white-bearded *shaykh,* with a face like a dolphin's belly and a neck like an elephant's throat, advancing ponderously across the floor. Despite his change in appearance, there was no mistaking the flat nose and huge figure of the terrible Abu al Kurbaj.

"Perhaps your soothsayer will deign to read the future for me, Layla," he said. "What say you, mother?"

"With joy and gladness, my lord," I croaked.

The *shaykh* drew up an ottoman, and sitting down, observed me minutely.

"What large hands you have, mother," he said, presently, "and what enormous feet."

"I am as Allah made me," I replied, sensing danger.

"The ways of Allah are past all understanding," observed the *shaykh.* "Yet never before have I seen a woman with hands and feet like a man."

At this, I knew the time for shamming had passed. With a sudden leap, I clutched him by the bull throat, but I might, with equal success, have attempted to choke a hippopotamus.

He seized my wrists and flung me from him as if I were a child. "*Ya,* Mormous! *Ya,* Mahmet! To me!" he bellowed. Then two stalwart eunuchs burst into the room, bared blades in hand. . . .

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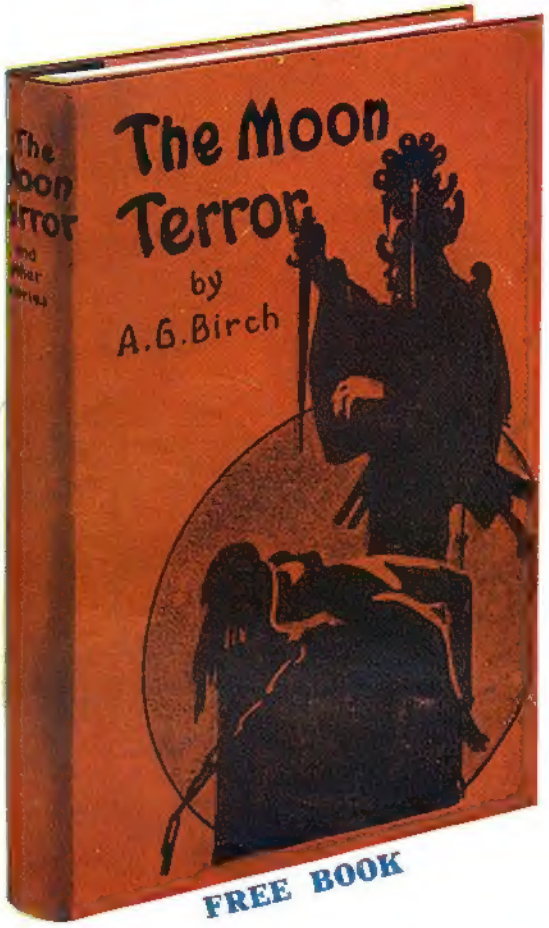

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